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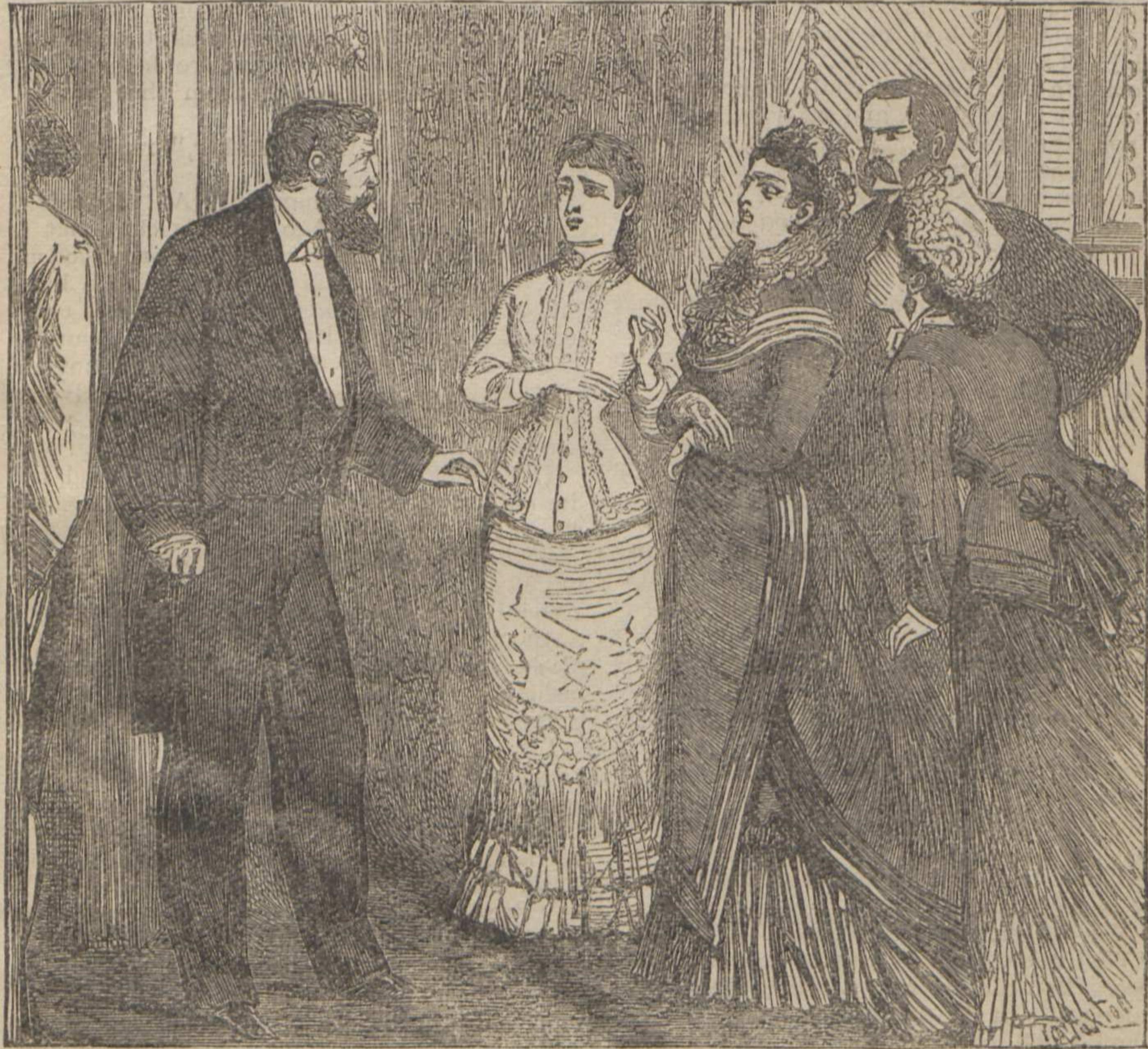
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"HIS WIFE WAS THERE BEFORE HIS EYES."

FORBIDDEN BANS;

Or, ALMA'S DISGUISED PRINCE.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH.

CHAPTER I.

RONALD NORMANLOE, ESQ., AND SON.
A LONG, steep hill, bathed in rich morning

sunlight, deep shadows here and there under the tall hedge-rows of towering trees; the glowing warmth of midsummer, where the sun's beams fell unchecked on meadow and upland.

Two figures were climbing this steep roadway. One, a man of thirty or thereabouts, who limped, and leaned on a stick; the other a boy, eight or nine years old.

Both had an air of shabby gentility; but you forgot this entirely in looking into the

boy's dark eyes, and admiring his noble beauty.

"Stop, and let me breathe a moment, you young vagabond!" cried the man. "You go trudging on without caring what I may suffer. You haven't sprained your ankle. Whew!"

The boy came to a halt, but made no reply to this harsh, coarse speech. He was too much accustomed, to it, poor little fellow! And yet this man was his father.

"How hot and suffocating it is!" growled the man. "Here! carry these things up the hill. That'll lighten me a little."

He emptied the contents of his pocket upon the dusty road, leaving the child to pick them up, while he hobbled to the nearest bit of shade, and sat down to rest.

the child to pick them up, while he hobbled to the nearest bit of shade, and sat down to rest.

Upon the gravelly highway lay a heterogeneous mass—letters, a packet of papers, two handkerchiefs, keys, a French roll in a paper bag, a traveling cap, and other articles.

The boy found it difficult to dispose of them all; but trembling with haste, his small white fingers stowed these things as well as he could into a basket he carried.

"Now, Master Ronald, have the goodness to pay particular attention to what I'm going to say to you!" said the man.

Ronald stood by, painfully attentive.

"Are you listening? Can't you open your mouth?"

"Yes, father."

"You'll have to do as well as listen, and that instantly," continued Ronald's father. "So you'd better pay attention, or it'll be worse for you! Well, sir, as I didn't count on spraining my ankle, and, therefore, thought we could walk by easy stages to where we're going, sleeping a couple of nights in any hayfield such weather as this, I'd no idea that I should have to pay two railway fares—a matter of nearly ten shillings—to Burdon Green. Ten shillings is a fearful sum to give out of the only three sovereigns I have left in the world, and something must be done to make it up. D'ye understand that?"

"Yes, father," replied the child.

"Well, then, the only way to do it is for you to beg. You can do that, you lazy lout, as we go along, if you can do nothing else! Let me see how you'll set about it. Suppose that I am a gentleman, and that you meet me on the road. You ask for something to help you on. Now, then, on you go, and don't bungle."

But something in this command pierced little Ronald to the core. He tried to repress his sobs, that he might utter some words of entreaty; but it was in vain, and he burst into uncontrollable tears.

"Why, what's amiss—what's the matter with you?" roared the man.

"Oh, father, don't—don't let me beg! I'll work so hard! I really will!"

"Work!—you work? Why, what could you do? Who d'ye think would employ you, a mere child? You must beg. There's a trade for you at once! An easy one, too! I only wish I could see any lady coming up this precious hill. You should begin at once."

Shame and agony of soul were plainly depicted on the boy's burning cheeks and in his startled look.

His father noted nothing of this, however; but leaning carelessly forward, was just tying his shoe-string.

"Is that a house I see yonder?" continued the man, pointing with his stick toward an eminence discernible from where he was reclining. "There, peeping from that wood-crowned hight?"

"It is a large house, father," replied the child, with difficulty.

"Large! It is a mansion. Ah! to think that only three years ago I was rich!—that I was received at such places as that—received as a welcome guest! And now I am here, a beggar, or nearly so, and about to start my only son in life, not with twenty thousand pounds, as I once expected to do, but as a mendicant—a roadside beggar! Well, I hope you'll drive a good trade, Ronald, and help to support your miserable father."

The child's tears welled up again, and his lips quivered; but he managed to stifle the sob which rose in his breast.

"And now I find myself here, about to try to get some poor employ as a clerk. I, Mr. Ronald Normanloe, gentleman, who once had a thousand at my disposal, who married to please my fancy, and who had the run of fashionable society! And now I am ruined! It is enough to madden any man."

Little Ronald sunk down on the turf where he had been standing, and stealthily dried his eyes, still glancing fearfully along the road, up and down the steep way they had yet to traverse, to see if any lady or gentleman was in sight.

"I've told you before how it happened that I lost everything I had in the world, Ronald. Did you pay attention when I told you?"

"It was a bank that broke, where all your money was, father," said Ronald.

"It was that and something more," replied the man. "I speculated, and lost. That, and the bank stopping payment, reduced Ronald Normanloe, Esq., to Ronald Normanloe, the poor clerk—if I should have the luck to get this fine clerkship. If not, then I shall be Ronald Normanloe, *tramp!* And yet my own son refuses to exercise the honorable calling of beggar. We must put pride in our pockets now! I only wish I had thought of it sooner. We have met some very likely people to-day,

and you might have earned several shillings by opening your mouth and whining judiciously, Ronald. We'll try to make up for lost time, however."

Poor little Ronald's features began again to twitch. He thought of so many things in the past of his young life, which seemed to urge him *not* to do this dreadful thing.

He thought of his beautiful young mother—of how she had taught him to be a *gentleman*; remembered when he had himself given money to beggars, pitying, but at the same time despising them; thinking that they ought to work, not beg.

"We must be getting on our way again," said the man, rising. "Here! pick up my stick. Is nobody coming yet? Perhaps we shall meet some one soon. Did you suppose I could go on to support you now that I have to work for my own bread? No, no; you must do as the sons of other poor men do—work for your living!"

"So I would! Oh, I would willingly work hard at anything, father!" exclaimed the boy, as they resumed their march along the dusty country road.

"And perhaps you will also be so obliging as to inform me how you propose to earn your living, my noble Ronald?" asked his father, mockingly. "At what trade will you work? Will you go as a farm-laborer, or what?"

"I could weed a garden, father," said Ronald, resolutely.

"Weed a garden!" cried the man, imitating his childish accents. "And how much would you earn at weeding, pray?"

"I don't know, father."

"Don't know! No; I should think not! But I happen to know! I have paid boys often enough for weeding my gardens—when I had them: and I believe my bailiff gave fourpence a day! Why your breakfast alone would cost more than fourpence!"

"But I wouldn't let it cost more, father! I would have only a little milk and a lump of bread!"

"Indeed, most interesting garden-boy! You'd soon sing a different song—you, who have been accustomed to soft ways of living and dainty food! No; there's nothing for it but to turn you into a beggar! You have a face that will help you, and that's lucky!"

Little Ronald made no reply to this; but as he trudged on, so heavily laden, in the hot sun, was forming resolutions in the spirit of a young martyr.

It was wrong and disgraceful to beg; therefore, though he so much feared his father's anger, he must be a brave boy, and refuse.

"Ah! who are these people coming down the hill? What do they look like, eh, Ronald?"

"Some ladies in a pony-chaise!" faltered the child.

"The very thing! Run to the side of the carriage when they get near, off with your hat, and tell them (with tears in your eyes if you can) that you've eaten nothing all day! And don't forget to add something about your poor, dear, lame father! Let's hear how you'll begin?"

"I—I can't father!" answered Ronald.

"Can't! I'll teach you to say *can*, pretty soon, if you don't obey me! Here comes the carriage! Now for it!"

The vehicle approached—a beautiful turn-out, an elegant small barouche—drawn by a pair of cream-colored ponies, whose long tails incessantly switched off the flies from their sleek coats. A groom sat behind with folded arms; he wore a handsome livery and a cockade; while within the carriage sat a lady who managed the reins with skill and ease, and a pretty child, a girl, dressed all in white.

The lady drove slowly down-hill; she did not observe the two travelers on foot, more than to be aware that there were two people passing.

"Now is the time! Run up to the side of the carriage, and hold out your hand. Now!" said Ronald's father, in a low, but menacing, tone.

But Ronald walked straight on. He trembled, but was firm to what he thought right demanded of him. The barouche came almost to a stand-still as the well-fed, lazy ponies got to a shady place in the road.

But their mistress did not mean them to stand still switching their tails in the shade, for she was driving into the next town, and had to be at home again for luncheon; for her little pet daughter Alma, the tiny fairy in white who sat by her side, was five years old to-day, and was to entertain a select party of young ladies and boys somewhat older than herself, in honor of the occasion.

So the ponies were made to go on after a momentary pause, Ronald lost his chance of making his first essay in begging, and his father was furious.

"You little wretch!" cried the latter. "You dare to disobey me like this? You dare? You see the top of this hill—when we get up there I'll thrash you within an inch of your life! I'd do it now, but that I want this stick to help me along; and I'm going to break it over your back! Oh, I'll give you a lesson that shall last you your life! And if you won't beg, you sha'n't eat! No dinner for you to-day, nor supper either; and no breakfast to-morrow morning! You'll see!"

The boy shivered, but spoke no word. He was loaded, overcome with the heat, with fear and sorrow, and exhausted with fatigue.

Up to his eighth birthday he had had gentle hands to tend his wants; soft words of love, his mother's. He seldom then came into con-

tact with his dreaded father; while now—oh, life was too fearful! His father did not want him; had often said so, lately. Why, then, should not he, Ronald, creep away somewhere and die quietly by himself? Nobody would miss him—nobody! Long since, his mother had been driven away; she had gone back to her own country, to France, to a distant relative.

A dim idea, which had before been vaguely floating in his childish mind, now rose before him and took definite form.

He would run away from his father now, to-day, as soon as they got to the top of the hill! He would never have a better opportunity, for to-day his father was lame, and could not pursue and bring him back.

No idea of punishing his father by leaving him in his helplessness occurred to the boy. Oh, no; his father would be glad to get rid of him!

CHAPTER II.

"I CAME HERE TO DIE!"

"Now, then, two minutes more, and your bones will ache as they never ached before, Master Ronald! Here's the top of the hill, and I'll trouble you to follow me to that convenient patch of greensward there, to set down your basket, and to take your thrashing without too many howls! Be quick, sir!" bawled the elder Ronald, as the boy came after him but slowly. "You took your own way, and now I'll take mine!"

The man limped to the roadside, sat down on a mossy heath-covered bank—a charming and peaceful resting-place it looked—and grasped his stick savagely as the boy approached.

"Oh, how I will make you repent!" cried he, panting. "Be quick, I say! Down with the basket!"

The little fellow set it down suddenly, gave one scared look around, and then darted off into the woodland stretching out before him, where many broad green paths offered themselves to his flying feet.

"Hulloa! Stop! Ronald, come back! Ronald! Ronald! Ron-ald!" cried his startled father, suddenly altering his tone, and jumping up.

But Ronald never looked back. The frightened boy ran forward with all his strength.

After him—or, at least, down the green woodland path he had taken—limped the man; but no sight of his son rewarded him when he had turned the curve.

Hot, tired, and lame, he limped on through the wood, calling "Ron-ald! Ron-ald!"

But only the chirp of a bird, or a squirrel darting out of sight, caught his searching eye and strained ear.

"Miserable imp! What will become of him?

And he was useful to me in a thousand ways! Oh, when I catch him again, I'll tie him to my waist with a cord! I'll teach him to run away!" panted the man.

He sat down, exhausted, his weak ankle refusing to support him longer.

"This is a pretty business! Oh, when I do catch him—" grinding his teeth. He did not finish his sentence, but glared about him savagely.

He had yet three miles to walk to the nearest railway; and if he would reach it in time for the train to Burdon Green, must not linger, for he traveled slowly; and this unlooked-for flight of Ronald had hindered him already!

"Ron-ald!" he called again through the wood. But again only the woodland noises responded to his call. "The little wretch knew where we were going; he could speak and ask his way! I can't go limping about the country after him! It's an impossibility! He'll ask his way fast enough now; and beg, too, in real earnest! Miserable boy, what trouble he has given me! Now I shall have the pleasure of spending about seven shillings for a return ticket to this place to bring him on to Burdon Green, if I get that clerk's post! Oh, if I had him within reach of my stick now!"

Little Roland was at this moment curled up fast asleep, but a couple of miles away, hidden beneath some overhanging bushes which grew by the side of an empty ditch, now soft, dry, and made luxuriant by the growth of fern and heather, which spread on every side.

The lovely June day went slowly by in all its summer glory; evening stole on, and the sun's beams began to slant through the wood; but still little Roland slept on, unconscious whether it were day or night.

If he had run on a little further to the outskirts of the wood, he would have had a full view of the large mansion of which his father had caught sight that afternoon.

Large cedar trees grew on one side of the wide pleasure-grounds about it, and a broad drive led to the somewhat imposing entrance.

This property was called Westerly House, and Mr. and Mrs. Montagu Westerly lived there with their children—a lovely little girl and two boys.

Mrs. Westerly it was who had driven out that day and passed Ronald and his father on the hill. She had accomplished her drive in time to receive a large young party at luncheon; and little Alma Westerly, whose birthday it was, had enjoyed herself to her heart's content.

All the afternoon the young guests had played out of doors among the flowers, and had afterward had tea on the lawn.

And even when the last guest went away at seven o'clock, there were other treats in store for Alma on this her seventh birthday.

First of all, her father had promised to take her a walk in the wood to see the squirrels; and it was a rare treat to have a walk with papa, for he was always busy, being a member of Parliament, a magistrate, and a colonel of yeomanry. Mr. Westerly and his little daughter set off very happily, Alma Prattling all the way.

But she had been on her feet nearly the whole day, and when they turned to go home, she said, "Oh, papa, let me rest a little before we go back."

Close by there was a convenient, heath-covered bank, and both sat down, Alma's bright eyes delightedly following the movements of a squirrel which darted down a tree just overhead, disappearing almost at her feet under the ferns.

"Oh, papa!" cried she, suddenly; "there is a little boy asleep down there in the ditch!" And rising, ran to Ronald.

"Mr. Westerly touched the boy's arm, saying: "Time to wake up and go home, my boy! Where do you live?"

Ronald half roused and moaned.

His head ached painfully, his throat was parched with thirst, and he was weak from want of food.

"Is he hurt, poor child, I wonder?" said Alma's father, again trying to awaken the child.

At his voice and touch, Ronald at last sprung up.

"What is the matter?" asked Mr. Westerly, kindly.

For answer, Ronald gazed tremblingly round him, and burst into tears.

"I—I am so thirsty!" said he.

"And hungry, too, perhaps?" said the gentleman.

"Yes," replied the boy, feebly.

"Oh, don't be hungry!" cried little Alma, coming forward. "I'll give you a large bit of my birthday cake, and some cold chicken, and bread and butter, if you will come home with me!"

Mr. Westerly smiled at Alma's invitation, saying to Ronald: "Yes, come to the house with us, and get something to eat and drink. Then you will feel well enough to go home. How did you get here, and where do you come from?"

"I came here to hide away till I was dead!" said the boy, pitifully. "But now I am so thirsty—so hungry!"

"Here, come with me at once!" cried Mr. Westerly, taking Alma's hand, and making a short cut through the wood to his own lawn.

The servants were removing the tea-tables, which had been spread out of doors, and piles of eatables were yet untouched.

Ronald was soon supplied with some delicious milk, and drank eagerly.

"Oh, now I can speak!" said he, gratefully.

"Drink some more!" cried Alma. "You shall have plenty of strawberries directly, when you have had some chicken."

The little girl stood by, delighted to see him eat, and when Ronald had finished such a meal as he had not partaken of for nearly a year past, then Mr. Westerly repeated his question: "How did you get here, and where do you come from?"

"I don't know—I'm all alone! I traveled a long way, till I couldn't go any further!"

"All alone! But you have a father or mother, or somebody belonging to you?"

"No," said Ronald, very sadly; "I am all alone."

"What! no one to care for you? But where have you come from, then?" cried Mr. Westerly.

"I had a home once—a nice one," said the boy—"quite nice"—looking round him; "but my father lost all his money, and mamma went away and left me nearly two years ago, and I've no one belonging to me now—no one. Oh, sir," added the boy, clasping his hands piteously, "do let me stay here, and work in the gardens. I can weed the paths. I used to weed my own garden at home. Indeed, I thought I was going to die; but now I am better I want to work, and I can learn to work well."

"Dear papa," cried Alma, coming forward, with tears in her blue eyes, "won't you take care of this dear little boy? He can stay here very well—there's plenty of room; and he can help me keep my garden neat. Oh, do say yes, papa!"

"I must inquire into this," said Mr. Westerly, gravely. Then, to his little daughter, "Don't be distressed, my pet; this little boy shall sleep here to-night, and we will see what we can do for him to-morrow. Come along, and let us tell mamma all about it. Here she comes to ask us why we don't go in to dinner."

Mrs. Westerly came smiling toward them, in an elegant dinner costume, accompanied by a tall, handsome girl of seventeen, her husband's orphan sister, who lived with them. Alma's mother looked with curiosity at Ronald, wondering who he was; but when she had heard Alma's account of their finding him in the wood, regarded him with pity and interest.

"The housekeeper will put him up somewhere for to-night; I will give orders about him. He looks a wonderfully clean, nice child to be tramping about the country. I will just ask him his name, and then we must go to dinner," said she. "Here!" continued Mrs. Westerly, beckoning to him; "what is your name, my boy?"

Ronald, who was desperately afraid to tell

his name, lest his father should from that discover him, stammered out that it was Henry Charles, and then came to a stop. He had often heard his father say that theirs was an uncommon name, and he thought that, if known, it might lead to his father finding him; or, to what was almost as bad, being refused any work. Gentlemen's sons were not supposed to know how to work, and he wanted work above all things.

Poor Ronald had not the wit to invent a name on the spur of the moment, so he gave two of his Christian names—Henry Charles Ronald Normanloe being his full appellation.

A footman at that moment appeared to say that dinner was served, and, as it was past eight o'clock, Ronald was hastily consigned to the care of a servant.

The next morning, the breakfast being over, Mrs. Westerly went out into the garden to question the little wayfarer who had come to them, and to decide what was to be done with him. Alma, who was keenly interested in Ronald, was allowed to accompany her mother.

The servants had been kind to the boy, and he was now running about with one of the gardeners, trying to assist. Mr. Westerly had gone by an early train to town, and his wife felt that it devolved on her to settle what was to be done with the wayfarer.

"Alma, darling, go and tell that little boy to come to me."

"Yes, mother!" cried Alma, darting off and bringing back Ronald with her.

Hand in hand the children approached, his striking dark beauty contrasting well with her sylph-like appearance, fair complexion, and wealth of light curls.

"Here he is, mothie, dear!" cried she, leading him forward.

Already Ronald looked a different child. A comfortable bed, sufficient food, and deliverance from his terrible father, had worked wonders.

"Why, how's this? You don't look like the same little boy I saw last night," said Mrs. Westerly, smiling. "And so you were helping the gardener?"

"Yes; and I think I could learn to work here; and"—pointing eagerly to the gardener—"he says he thinks I could."

"Well, first let me hear how you got here," continued Mrs. Westerly. "Now tell me clearly."

"I walked a long, a very long way."

"Yes; but not all in one day?"

"Oh, no—day after day. At first I thought that I should live with my father, but"—the tears coming into his eyes—"he did not want me! He does not care for me. He says I must work for myself. And mother is far

away; she went to her own country—to France—when I was much younger."

Then followed other questions, and Mrs. Westerly came to the conclusion that this interesting child had been deserted by his father; that the latter had previously driven away his mother; that he had once had a respectable home, but was now tramping about the country; and that he must go to the workhouse, or learn to earn his own bread.

Then Mrs. Westerly began to interrogate him as to what he could do, and found, to her surprise, that, among other things, he could speak and read French very prettily, and play many little airs on the piano."

"Mamma had taught him," he said.

"Could he not remember what was his mother's name before she became Mrs. Charles? Had she never told him?"

"No; papa called her Hortense. He knew no other name for her."

Mrs. Westerly was greatly puzzled. She could hardly put a child like this to garden-work. And slowly a scheme she had long nurtured took shape in her mind.

He had evidently an inherited or natural taste for music; with ordinary culture would turn out a fair musician. Why not make this child, so forced upon her care, the means by which she could carry out that pet scheme of hers, and train him to be the village schoolmaster and organist?"

At sixteen, or even before, he would be able to do a large part of the teaching required in the village school, besides carrying on his musical studies; and, of course, as they would be at the expense of his training, he would not expect to receive more than a nominal salary for the first seven years.

By the evening, Mrs. Westerly was quite set upon carrying out her plan.

She made Ronald play several airs to her, and his firm touch and spirited rendering of the simple tunes still further impressed her with the fitness of this child for what she designed he should accomplish in the future.

She had, undoubtedly, earnestly desired to find his parents a few hours ago; now, though she intended to do all she could to discover them, she half hoped they would never appear.

The end of it all was, after a good deal of talk with her husband, and some useless efforts at tracing the child's father and mother, after repeated calculations, also, as to what the outlay would be, and what return might be reckoned on hereafter from the low salary they might fairly offer the young organist and schoolmaster for the first seven years, that Mr. Westerly agreed to his wife's plan; and Alma heard, with unbounded delight, that the nice little boy they had found in the wood was to be taught to play the organ, and was to go to school.

So Ronald was sent to a training school, where the pupils work hard, and are thoroughly taught English and arithmetic. A school where there are no luxuries, and where there is no idleness.

Ronald's music was specially provided for, and Mrs. Westerly took care that he practiced regularly during his short holidays both on the harmonium in the drawing-room and on a piano placed for this purpose in a room once occupied by her own boys as a play-room down-stairs. But they were at Eton now, and so Ronald could have the benefit of it.

"How that boy improves!" remarked Mr. Westerly, one day, as he caught the sound of the melody created by Ronald's fingers.

"He has the soul of a musician!" replied Mrs. Westerly, enthusiastically.

CHAPTER III.

MORE THAN TEN YEARS AFTER.

MORE than ten years have rolled away since the day on which we first made acquaintance with the desolate young boy, Ronald Normanloe.

For three years past, Ronald himself has been installed, virtually, as a schoolmaster and organist in Mrs. Westerley's village school; the poor old man who kept up the pretense of superintending the school after his own old-fashioned notions, while our Ronald was in training as his successor, having died after a long illness.

It is Christmas time, and the young schoolmaster has been harder at work than usual, as Mrs. Westerly wishes the choir to surpass themselves this year in the way of anthems and Christmas carols; and also desires them to practice certain part-songs, as she has invited a house-full of visitors for the New Year, and wishes to show what wonders her organist can effect on the raw material he has to deal with.

From seven to half-past eight has the young schoolmaster, Mr. Charles, as he is called, been drumming into the ears of his pupils the different melodies with which Mrs. Westerly designs to astonish and delight her expected guests, and right glad is he to turn the lock in the ponderous church door, and feel that work is over for the night.

In his own snug room, where he has gradually surrounded himself with a few things in which his soul delights, such as artist's tools, books of his own choosing, and where he secretly pens articles, which now and then, all unknown to others, have found their way into print—there, in this sanctum, he will forget the cares of the day, and its weary routine.

He says, Good-night!" cheerily to the choir boys and young men as he locks the church door and is opening the gate of the church-

yard leading to the road, when he is accosted by a footman from the top of a handsome carriage with the question, "Is this the right road to Pinegrove?"

"Yes; but it's two miles distant," answers Ronald, giving some further brief directions as to the way.

Somebody inside the carriage—a man past middle age—hastily thrusts his head from the window of the vehicle, saying in a hasty, impatient tone, "Is this the way, or not, John?"

"Yes, Sir Ronald," replied the servant.

"Then drive on, and get there as fast as you can!"

"Stay!" cried Ronald, springing forward, as the head of the gentleman disappeared, and the carriage window was as hastily pulled up as it had been let down. "Stay! What is the name of this gentleman?"

"Sir Ronald Normanloe, the new owner of Pinegrove," replied the servant, as the carriage drove on.

The young man, left alone in the roadway, with the winter night sole witness to his agitation, staggered back against the church-yard gate, and passed his hand confusedly over his handsome brow.

Had he here, in this unexpected manner, after the lapse of so many years, again beheld *his father*? And was that father the new owner of Pinegrove, the richest property in the neighborhood?

What thoughts surged through his ardent heart as he stood there in the night wind, hidden by the darkness! Through them all, even pushing aside for the time a sweet, young, and absorbing love, came the image of his mother.

If he could yet discover her, could *she* be made to benefit by this change of fortune for his father? But surely—surely there must be some strange mistake!

Long he remained motionless against the gate of the churchyard; but at length the approach of footsteps roused him, and on turning into the road he dimly discerned something white on the dark path.

"It must have dropped from the carriage," thought Ronald, picking it up and striding off toward his own room.

"You're late, Mr. Charles," remarked Mrs. Erne, who was the widow of the old schoolmaster, and who still lived on at the schoolhouse, and waited on her husband's successor.

"Am I?" asked Ronald, scarcely conscious of what he replied.

"Dear, yes!" returned Mrs. Erne. "And so pale, too! What's the matter? But there! your teeth are chattering with the cold! It's that church that's so draughty o' nights. But you'll find a good fire and supper ready; and I hope you'll enjoy it."

"Thank you, Mrs. Erne; I did not know it was so late," remarked he, passing on to his own room.

Once there, he eagerly examined what he had picked up—a fine white cambric handkerchief, with R. C. C. N. embroidered in the corner.

"I'll take it to Pinegrove myself the day after to-morrow; that will serve as an excuse for going there, and I shall find out more."

So determined Ronald, as the day after to-morrow was Saturday, a half-holiday.

In vain that night he took out his drawing materials to continue a cherished work he hoped to complete successfully; in vain made an effort to read a book of travels, and tossing that aside, tried to write.

It would not do. Two vivid pictures, from among the many others which forced themselves before his mental vision, stood out so startlingly and clearly, that they eclipsed all else. The picture of himself, a young, defenseless boy on the hillside with his stern father, the day when he refused to beg; and this other, which had overpowered him to-night—the handsome carriage, and sleek pair of horses, and the figure of his father.

Wild dreams chased themselves through his brain that night—dreams in which another form, far different to that of his father, passed and repassed before him; a girl owning a sweet and youthful face, blue eyes which smiled into his; but, as often as he tried to clasp her hand, some one intervened to separate them.

He was glad to awake. Morning dispelled his feverish thoughts; and there was hope that his visit to Pinegrove might unravel the mystery.

The usual routine of work was gone through; and, when over, he felt so much in need of something to take him out of himself, that possessing himself of the key of the church, he went and shut himself up there, to drown his troubled self-questioning by playing some grand symphony of Beethoven's.

The silence of the church, the painted beauty of the windows (for the little village church was richly decorated) the grandeur of the melody which rolled forth under his skillful hands, soothed him. Carried away by the harmony, he forgot his pain.

The music was swelling through the edifice, so that he did not hear the church-door softly unclose, and a light footfall in the aisle, and for a moment or two was unconscious that the owner of the blue orbs which had haunted his dreams of the night before was standing listening to the music.

But presently he caught a glimpse of a graceful girlish form, habited in a dark-blue robe, trimmed with silver-fox fur, and the musician, striking some hasty chords, rose from his seat.

Then the elegant girl, habited in the rich fur mantle, came toward Ronald with a smile and a blush.

"I stole in to hear the music, Mr. Charles," said she, timidly. "I wondered to hear the organ at this hour."

"No; I don't often come here to practice immediately after the morning's work; but to-day I wanted some grand melody to—to set me to rights again."

"And is anything the matter, then?" asked Alma, sympathizingly.

"I ought not to say there is; and yet I have been greatly moved since yesterday—deeply agitated!" said he. "But I don't like to mention it to—to any one just yet!"

"Then I won't ask to know. Only, if I could help you, you might count on my silence," said Alma.

"Oh, what a relief it would be to tell what happened!" cried he, suddenly.

"Then do—do let me hear! Do you think I have quite forgotten my debt of obligation to my old music-master?"

Alma Westerly said this with a smile; and smiles such as hers, bestowed on a handsome young fellow with an artist's soul, such as Ronald Normanloe possessed, are precious, but dangerous, gifts.

And was there no danger for her, the young, impressionable beauty?

Silence and solitude, the painted light all about them, and the dark, handsome young fellow beside her, whom her baby compassion had helped to rescue from perishing in the wood such long years ago, in these things was there no danger?

Memories from the intervening years crowded upon her in that moment—many incidents of years not so far past but that they rose up vividly now. For Mrs. Westerly had turned the musical talent of her *protege* to account for her own children's benefit as well as for those of the village; and when Alma was twelve years old, Ronald had begun to give her and her brothers lessons on the piano and the organ, and these lessons were continued at intervals till Alma had nearly reached the ripe age of fifteen.

But, very prudently, instruction from the handsome and talented young schoolmaster was stopped ere Alma's fifteenth birthday.

She was now seventeen, and about to be launched in all the whirl of Christmas gayeties, followed by a season in London; and it was madness for the young organist and schoolmaster to dream of her so frequently as he did in secret.

But there she stood before him now, saying, in her gentlest accents, "Do you think I have quite forgotten my debt of obligation to my old music-master?"

"Shall I ever forget mine to you?" cried he,

impetuously, advancing a step nearer, but restraining himself from seizing her hand. "Ah, there are some things we can never forget; and I still remember, and shall cherish to my dying day, the sight of your childish face welcoming me when I was a little famishing wanderer!"

"Forget those troubles. You have made yourself an honorable position," said Alma, softly.

"Only yesterday I was forcibly reminded of those days! Something happened very unexpectedly last night!" said Ronald, with moved voice and agitated face.

"It is that which you are going to tell me?" asked Alma.

"Yes!" he answered—"yes!"

They were both standing now not far from the font, the young girl's bright form just touched with a ray of winter sunlight which fell upon the colored floor.

"Promise," continued Ronald, "to be silent respecting this for a short time? Perhaps it is selfish of me to seek the relief of telling you; but when quite alone in the world—"

"Oh, I want to hear!" interrupted she, eagerly.

And then he told his tale briefly, but with low tones, full of emotion.

"Last night, about your dinner hour, I was leaving the church—the choir boys had just run off home. I was closing the gate of the churchyard, when a very handsome carriage drew up, and the servant on the box asked me if that was the way to Pinegrove. As I was answering him, a gentleman put his head out of the window of the carriage, and asked impatiently if that was the right road; and then, as I believe, I came suddenly face to face with my own father!"

"What!" exclaimed the young girl, deeply moved; "your father?"

"Yes; if what I imagine is correct, my father is the new owner of Pinegrove!"

"But how could that happen? Your name is Charles!" said Alma, mystified.

"No; my full name is Henry Charles Ronald Normanloe."

Alma's face flushed with excited feeling, and perhaps with some secret, unknown hope.

"But why did you tell us that your name was Charles?" asked she.

"Because, as a boy, I so much feared my father, and something happened on the day I parted from him which made me resolve that he should not find me through the name. I was afraid to give it in full, and when Mrs. Westerly supposed that I meant my name was Charles, I was glad to let it go as such."

"And your real name is Ronald Normanloe?" said Alma.

"Yes, it certainly is. That sudden recognition of my father had unhinged me, and that

was how it happened that you found me here just now trying to drown troublesome thoughts with Beethoven's grand music.

CHAPTER IV.

"WHO IS HE?"

THEY had parted in haste, after some other confidences, Alma remembering that her mother would wonder where she was at luncheon time; and Ronald awakened to the fact that it was the school-hour, and he not at the school-house.

But Alma went away with her young heart all aglow with the discovery she had made. She had but wandered out through her father's grounds when the sound of the organ pealing out grandly on the still air had induced her to cross the road, and softly push open the church door; and behold this wonderful story awaited her. That the little boy she and her father had found in the wood should prove to be Sir Ronald Normanloe's son! Why, it was like a fairy tale! Pinegrove was a magnificent old place, much larger and grander than Westerly House. What a romance if Mr. Charles were to go live there, and finally become the owner of Pinegrove!

He had confided to her his design of walking over there to morrow, to restore the handkerchief, and she was thrilled with excitement as to the end of this drama of real life.

How many times she asked herself during that and the succeeding day what was happening at Pinegrove! How Mr. Charles had prospered? What he had done? Nor did the remembrance of the hand clasp he had given her at parting fail to intrude itself continually on her mind; for they had never shaken hands since childish days, he being only the schoolmaster of the village. And now she it was who had offered her hand as they said farewell.

Her mother and aunt must have noticed her abstraction, but that they were more occupied than usual with preparations for the reception of visitors, and also for some private theatricals and a concert, both of which were to come off before Christmas.

Alma's aunt, that sister of Mr. Westerly's who has been merely alluded to before as living at Westerly House, is a somewhat important personage in this narrative; therefore, we will here say that she was now a very handsome young woman of six-and-twenty; but (perhaps because she had no dowry) matrimonial affairs had not been a success with her, and we was still unwedded. That she should yet make a good match was, however, a great desire of Mr. and Mrs. Westerly.

"It must be over long before now, his visit to Pinegrove," mused Alma, as her maid was arraying her for dinner. "Ah! how I long to see him again, to know if he has had an inter-

view with his father! To think that he is well born, as much a gentleman as any of mamma's guests to-night; and yet he is there at the village school, and quite apart from everybody—always alone!"

She sighed, and her maid wondered what her young lady could have to trouble her.

"I hope you like the effect, Miss Alma," said she, smoothing out the folds of the soft, pale blue dress, to which she had just attached a bouquet of gardenias like those in Alma's hair.

"Oh, yes, thank you, Thurton," answered the young girl, assertively.

"There is a large party to-night, I believe, miss," continued the maid.

"Yes, mamma told me."

Alma went dreamily down the grand staircase, all the while thinking of Ronald Normanloe. She was very silent in the drawing-room, not caring to listen to the unmeaning conversation going on around her. But hardly was she seated at table when she was effectually roused from her reverie by the remarks which caught her ear.

"I walked from the station to your house, Mrs. Westerly—walked by preference after my long railway journey; and let your carriage take my portmanteaus," observed the gentleman who sat by her mother; "and on my way I ran against a prince in disguise. Who is he?"

"I did not know we were so favored hereabouts," replied Mrs. Westerly, smiling. "Now you must explain what he is like, for I am all in the dark."

"Let me tell you he is a very interesting fellow—tall, very tall; has a noble face, extremely dark eyes, is handsome, and looks born to command. Added to which, his conversation was fresh and original, and I am much mistaken if my unknown is not a universal genius. Do enlighten me as to who he is?"

"I am still in the dark, Lord Vale," said Mrs. Westerly, though she certainly had a suspicion as to who this unknown might be. But she was unwilling that the men-servants in the room should hear these high encomiums paid to the village schoolmaster. They might get repeated, and young Charles, her *protege*, value himself more highly than she thought proper to rate him. Thus she affected not to be enlightened.

"Oh, but I must find him out!" cried his lordship. "Whoever it was, he knew all the ins and outs of your place; for I overtook him you know, on his way to Westerly House, and so we talked as we went. When he understood I had come here on a visit, he said, 'Oh, then, I can show you a short road to the entrance;' and led me to a tall, narrow iron gate, which I could never have discovered for myself. 'That will save a quarter of a mile,' remarked my entertaining companion; and opening the

gate for me, he bade me a courteous good-night, and vanished. I can't tell you how he interested me!"

"I'll tell you who it was, and a very nice young man he is, too, and very musical. Our village schoolmaster," said Miss Adelaide Westerly, taking up the conversation. (She always seized every opportunity of bringing herself into notice where practical results might follow; and Lord Vale was middle-aged, a widower without incumbrance, and might be disposed toward matrimony.)

"The schoolmaster?—impossible!" cried his lordship. "This young fellow was a thorough gentleman. No village pedagogue would have gone over the varied ground he did in our varied chance talk. He could not have been the schoolmaster. Besides, he was so young—not more than twenty!"

"Oh, yes! that was the schoolmaster," said Adelaide; "and he is also the organist. My sister-in-law had him trained for his work. But don't imagine he is a prince in disguise; for he was evidently a poor boy, deserted by his parents, and quite homeless. My brother found him hiding in the wood near the house in a famished condition. I'm so sorry to disenchant you, Lord Vale." And Adelaide laughed a playful, silvery laugh.

Alma's heart beat very fast and her eyes sparkled.

"Suppose," said she, lightly, "he should turn out to belong to some old family, after all? You know such things have happened in the course of the world's history. Then Lord Vale would be right in his conjecture."

"I am not so much given to romantic fancies as you, Alma," laughed Adelaide Westerly, turning to their visitor, whose attention she was so anxious to engross. "Do tell me, Lord Vale," she added, "what our new neighbor, Sir Ronald Normanloe, is like? for you have met him, I think you said, in town."

Alma's face flushed again, and she listened intently as before.

"Sir Ronald Normanloe?" resumed Lord Vale. "Oh, yes; I did run up against him at my lawyer's. But I don't know that there is anything remarkable about him, except that he is the owner of a particularly fine property. To my mind, he is not a pleasant-looking man; but appearances are often deceptive."

"We must call upon him, or rather my husband must," interposed Mrs. Westerly, "and I mean to ask him to our theatricals; so we shall see what he is like."

"Isn't he rather elderly?" asked Adelaide Westerly, again addressing Lord Vale.

"Oh, dear, no, unless you call me elderly. I'm five-and-forty, and I put Sir Ronald down at that age."

"Then we may look for a Lady Normanloe at Pinegrove in course of time. It will be

pleasant to have a lady there as neighbor," remarked Mrs. Westerly. "The late owner of Pinegrove had such wretched health that the house was as good as closed; for a childless widower in ill-health cannot see much society."

"This man has never been married, has he?" asked Lord Vale.

"I believe not," said Mrs. Westerly.

The hearts of two people beat with accelerated pulsation at this reply—those of Alma and of Adelaide Westerly.

Adelaide was saying to herself, "It shall not be *my* fault if I am not mistress of Pinegrove this time next year." While Alma was distracted with reconciling her mother's reply with the account she had heard from Ronald but yesterday.

"All sorts of stories are afloat concerning this Sir Ronald," continued Adelaide, again appealing to Lord Vale. "It is said that he was *very* poor, almost starving, when this fine property was left him. Does he look like a gentleman?"

"A gentleman?—oh yes; and certainly not a half-starved man. But I suppose he was far from rich before he came in for this wind-fall; for it is pretty sure he only had a clerkship to depend on. My lawyer told me so. Sir Ronald speculated as a young man, and lost a good deal of money that way; and he was unfortunate, besides. Then a bank broke, and ruined him—that and his unfortunate speculations. But he comes of a good old family, though he never expected to succeed to the baronetcy."

"How was it his relations didn't help him on a bit?" asked Mrs. Westerly.

"I believe he had quarreled with them, or they with him. Anyhow, he was glad to take a clerkship, and stick to it. What is a man to do who has been brought up to expensive habits and no profession?"

"What indeed?" said Mrs. Westerly. "I know my boys would find it hard enough to get a living if they were suddenly turned adrift to provide for themselves. So I feel inclined to pity our new neighbor and to welcome him."

"I'm told his late cousin, who has left him all this wealth, never even saw him," said Lord Vale, as they rose from the table. "Lucky fellow, he is, to be the owner of such a place as Pinegrove!"

CHAPTER V.

PINEGROVE.

AND how had Ronald sped that day on his agitated journey? With his young soul all on fire to know the truth, with his young heart beating ardently with love for the fair girl to whom he had given his confidence in his trouble, he started on his errand.

The winter day was bright, with a suspicion of frost in the air, and Ronald was not long in getting over the two miles which lay between him and Pinegrove.

How often he had walked this way in other days! How often looked admiringly at the grand old mansion, backed by fir-woods, crowning an imposing eminence; but never had he dreamed of gazing upon it with feelings such as now moved him; for he asked himself to-day if this fine old place *was his father's?*—if one day he would call it *his own?* If that should be so, then he might dare to tell his love to Alma, whom hitherto he had only thought to worship at a distance.

But he remembered too well his father's severity and bitterness, to hope much from him. Still, it might be that the estate was left to his father, and secured to his lawful heirs. In that case, he might yet be provided for.

Ronald had no thought of discovering himself in this first interview; what he wanted to make sure of was whether he had indeed seen his father.

The last owner of Pinegrove, a sickly invalid, whom he had caught sight of at rare intervals driving out, had been named Middleton, and Ronald had never been aware that this wealthy man was related to his own family.

It was a puzzle to him to find the new proprietor of this property addressed as Sir Ronald. How had he come by the title? Plainly not by inheriting from Mr. Middleton.

All along the high road, which bordered the wide-spreading grounds call Pinegrove, Ronald brooded over these problems, and also what he should do when he had reached the house.

He came to the conclusion that he would ask to see the baronet to return the handkerchief which he had found.

That course decided on, he believed it would be easy to discover whether that father would welcome or reject him.

A very handsome carriage was driving up to the door as Ronald neared the mansion, and he recognized the smart liveries of the footmen as those worn by Lord Tremare's servants—Lord Tremare being a magnate in the neighborhood.

His lordship would not fail to make unpleasant comments if he became aware of the Westerly village schoolmaster ringing at Sir Ronald Normanloe's front entrance; and Ronald would not go to the back of the mansion, lest he should be denied admission. Thus he waited about the park till he saw old Lord Tremare hobble out again to his carriage.

"Now to make the venture!" thought Ronald, preparing to present himself as a visitor.

But at that moment two other carriages rolled

up to the door, and soon after came a gentleman on horseback; and the short winter afternoon was closing in before the tired and agitated young man saw a chance of finding the Baronet alone.

Not without a strange emotion did he at length ring at the imposing entrance, and announce himself as Mr. Charles.

The servant who took his name conducted him through a lofty hall paved with mosaic, along a corridor hung on each side with family portraits, and then through an ante-room into an apartment of noble dimensions, with painted ceiling, supported by many pillars, and commanding a fine view, but filled with a dim light by reason of the fast-falling twilight.

But there was a bright fire on the ample hearth, and not far from it, reclining in a luxurious chair, while sipping a cup of tea from delicate china, was the man he had come to see.

"Mr. Charles!" announced the servant; and then the gentleman who was sipping his tea rose, with a tired and languid air, and came a step forward.

"Have I the pleasure of—of making the acquaintance of a new neighbor?" began the owner of Pinegrove.

"No, Sir Ronald," answered the young man; "but I have taken the liberty of walking over here this afternoon to ask if this did not fall from your carriage the other evening."

"Do sit down! Pray sit down!" said Sir Ronald, indicating a chair to his visitor, and himself sinking again on his luxurious cushions, but thereby placing his face in gloom. "Let me give you a cup of tea?"

"You are very kind. Thank you, Sir Ronald!" said the young schoolmaster, willing to prolong this interview, on which so much depended.

How tantalizing to see his father, if such he were, by this dim light! But could he doubt that tone, the air so well remembered? No; Ronald felt sure that it was indeed his father who sat so near him; and all the incidents upon the hill, now nearly eleven years ago, came crowding to his mind with painful distinctness.

Again he saw himself a terrified child; again heard the harsh command that he should beg; again felt the sharp fear of disgrace, and all the subsequent despair.

But the whole scene passed before him with lightning-like rapidity, and it was interrupted by a courteous inquiry from Sir Ronald as to whether he took cream.

Could it be reality that they met thus? And meeting, was it possible that there was no recognition on his father's part?

Apparently, none. The elder man reclined quite at his ease, wearing an air of supreme contentment,

"This is the small article I picked up in the road near Westerly House the other evening," said Ronald, presenting the handkerchief, when he had answered the inquiry concerning the cream.

"Indeed, it was most kind of you to take the trouble to bring it here," said the baronet, placing it carelessly on a bijou table at hand. "Near Westerly House? Yes, my carriage drove that way. Thank you very much indeed! May I ask to whom I am indebted for this politeness?"

"To your son! To the boy you drove from you so many years since!" Ronald could have answered, so assured did he feel by this time that the elegant, indolent form before him was certainly that of his father.

But all the voices in his heart seemed to cry out to him to pause awhile, to feel the ground on which he went; and so he only replied, though with some emotion, "I—I am the organist at Westerly church—organist and schoolmaster!"

"Indeed!" cried Sir Ronald, as a footman entered, bearing candles in tall silver candlesticks. "Indeed! Pardon me for saying that you appear very young to occupy such important posts. I think you said your name was Charles?"

"I am named Henry Charles," replied Ronald, with still more emotion.

"Allow me to give you another cup of tea, Mr. Charles. It is a cold night, so let me persuade you. Mr. and Mrs. Westerly will be almost my nearest neighbors here, I suppose? Have they a large family?"

Ronald answered these interrogatories as well as he could; but he felt suffocated.

He was saying to himself that not even for Pinegrove would he make himself known to a father who did not love him—who was as cold, and cynical, and hard as in former days.

But there was his mother to consider. She might benefit by this accession to wealth, if she could be found. And there was Alma. How could he ever hope to win her if he had not a fit position to offer her?

But would *this* father welcome him? That he could test, he believed, without risking anything now.

"Let me thank you for your courtesy, and wish you good-night, Sir Ronald," said the young man, rising to take leave.

"Nay; it is I who must thank you," returned the Baronet. "But will you go so soon? You have been sitting at a distance from the fire; pray come nearer before going out into the cold."

Ronald declined. He cast one look round the richly-furnished room, replete with every luxury, and then bowed himself out.

But Sir Ronald had already rung the bell, and a servant was waiting to conduct him

again through the lofty hall, and to close the handsome portal after him when he had passed out into the murky winter night.

Think no scorn of the young man, when I tell you that, on finding himself alone with night and silence, he brushed away scalding tears.

The sudden contact with his father had quite unnerved him. It had made him feel doubly his own desolate position—he so alone in the world, so shut out from those of his own class. What of his future? He could not augur much from it if it depended on the cold, proud man whose presence he had just quitted.

He was roused from his sad reverie by a woman's voice.

"Could you tell me, if you please, sir, whether I am going right for Pinegrove?"

"Eh?" cried Ronald, rousing himself from his absorption. "Pinegrove? It is half a mile further on. But if you are a stranger to the road, keep the highway."

"I'm come from London, sir. I'm the new housekeeper engaged for Pinegrove; and there must be some mistake, as I expected a fly to meet me, and couldn't get any conveyance at the small station to-night."

"Dear me; how awkward for you! And you have walked here alone? Well, it isn't late; only getting so dark."

"That's it, sir. But I sha'n't be much longer now."

Ronald had a suspicion that the woman was very timid; so he good-naturedly turned back, saying, "Let me see you safe to the park entrance. I need a brisk walk."

"You are too kind, sir; I am timid in these lonely roads, I confess."

"Did you know anything of Sir Ronald before being engaged as housekeeper?" asked Ronald, as once more he walked in the direction of Pinegrove.

The young man fancied there was a strange hesitation in her voice as she replied, "I'd heard of him, sir, and how rich he was, and I was very glad to get the post of housekeeper. I hope I shall suit; but 'tis a large household to keep in order."

"Yes, it is. But I want to ask you whether you knew anything of this new Baronet before he became Sir Ronald? For instance, was he married?"

"I've heard that he gives out that he's a bachelor, and never been married, sir."

Again Ronald noticed that strange hesitation and trouble in her voice. But he himself felt so strongly troubled, that he could not for some moments continue his attempts at gleaning information. If this were true—if his father had determined to repudiate his former ties, how difficult would be the task before him! It rushed upon him in that moment, for the first time, that he had ac-

tually no proofs to bring forward to convince others that he *was* the son of this man. He might feel absolutely sure of it himself, but how could he make any claim before the world?

"Here you are safe at Pinegrove!" said he, in a broken voice, to the woman. "Good-night! I hope you are not very tired."

"Good-night, and a thousand thanks, sir! Would you mind telling me to whom I am indebted for so much kindness?"

"I am the schoolmaster and organist at a village called Westerly, about a couple of miles away. Good-night!"

"But your name, sir?" cried the woman, in a piercing voice.

"Charles," said he, moved, and wondering at her agitation.

He could hear her sigh, as she answered in quite another tone, "I am so much obliged! Good-night, sir!"

This incident recurred to him again and again, in spite of weightier matters. He promised himself that some day he would see that housekeeper again. But this night he must do what had occurred to him to ascertain his father's feelings as to the past, and to obtain some sure ground to go upon.

He was glad it was Saturday evening, as Mrs. Erne was generally out, or busier than usual, and in his present mood he longed for complete solitude.

A light twinkled in one window of the schoolhouse. He let himself in with a latch-key, and, disregarding the evening meal left ready for him, penned this letter:

"LONDON, December 11th.
SIR: It will be no great effort to you to remember the day, now nearly eleven years since, when your only son parted from you, after his refusal to beg from a lady who was driving down a hilly road in the country. The child so terrified that day has now grown into a young man, fortunately not without culture and education, and is supporting himself in an honorable way.

"During the years which have elapsed, it has never been possible to him to make an effort to reconcile himself with his father. He does so now by means of this communication, which will reach you through a third party, and hopes that it may not be in vain. A letter will reach Mr. Ronald Normanloe at the address inclosed."

This letter Ronald placed under cover to a young man who had been one of his fellow-students at the training-school, and with whom he had maintained a friendship. Without explaining anything, he begged to have the inclosed letter posted in London, and that any reply might be sent to him which came addressed to "Mr. Normanloe." And then he went out again, and himself posted the letter.

A thrill of expectation went through him as the missive fell into the box. He had taken a direct step toward a return to wealth, and to the father he dreaded.

CHAPTER VI.

WAITING.

FEVERISH days followed—days in which Ronald was torn with suspense, for no answer had yet come to his letter, and no word could he get alone with Alma.

Her mother had come twice during that week to the school, and the young girl had accompanied her; but there was no opportunity for the two to speak apart.

In his restlessness he had again gone, day after day, to the empty church ostensibly to practice; but no light form and girlish face relieved his solitude.

He grew miserable. Mrs. Westerly herself asked if he were not well.

At length, on the morning of the following Saturday, a letter arrived, which he tremblingly opened. It was as follows:

“PINEGROVE, December 19.

“Sir Ronald Normanloe presents his compliments to his mysterious correspondent, and begs to say that he has no knowledge whatever of any Mr. Ronald Normanloe; nor can he pretend to remember the unknown incident, hinted at so darkly, concerning the hill and the lady who drove down it.

“Sir Ronald Normanloe has no son, and is at a loss to account for the similarity of name mentioned; but Sir Ronald would know how to repel any attempt to foist on him a person with whom he has nothing to do.

“Sir Ronald Normanloe declines peremptorily to continue this correspondence.”

And this was all—this the end of his feverish week of expectation! Even the organ failed to soothe him now, for he had no power for the moment to call forth the spirit of the music.

Meanwhile, up at Westerly House, something had occurred which, all unknown to Ronald, concerned him.

Lord Vale was to take a leading part in the theatricals, and was suddenly summoned away by the death of a great uncle, who had bequeathed all he possessed to his lordship.

“What shall we do now?” cried Mrs. Westerly, in despair. “The invitations are issued, and there is no one who can take the chief part in our little play—absolutely no one! Lord Vale did it with such spirit, too! It is truly vexatious! I must put off the theatricals. It would be impossible to get any one to take his place on so short a notice; and the house is full of visitors! How annoying!”

“Mrs. Westerly, allow me to suggest a person who will, I feel sure, sustain my part, and with success, too,” said Lord Vale, who was waiting for his train, and, in coming to say adieu to his hostess, had overheard some of her remarks. “Get that clever fellow, your organist, to come up to-night, coach him up a bit, and he’ll do, I’ll wager. A fellow with a face like his is up to anything.”

Alma stood by and heard this, and so did Adelaide Westerly. Now the latter was most

anxious that the theatricals, in which she was to be a part, should come off quite successfully; and Mrs. Westerly herself was in such a difficulty that she soon fell in with Lord Vale’s suggestion.

“He is clever, no doubt,” said she.

“Have him up to-night,” cried Adelaide. “I will devote myself to showing him his part all the evening as soon as dinner is over.”

“And what about asking him to join us at supper after the play is over, Adelaide? That will be very awkward. And yet how can I send him to the housekeeper’s room after he has been helping us act?”

“What does it matter,” asked Adelaide, testily “if you ask him to sit down with us for once on such an occasion? An organist is removed a little from the common order, and young Charles is a very presentable person. Half our guests will not know that he is a schoolmaster. Besides, at Christmas there must be mixed parties. Of course at such a time, in the country, it is permissible to do many things which could not be ventured on in London.

“Exactly. Just as at a school feast, or gathering of that sort. Well, then, I had better do the thing gracefully, and write a note asking him to help us with the theatricals, and to join us for the rest of the evening. Here, I will write it at once, and he must have it immediately.”

“Shall I leave the note, mamma?” asked Alma, quietly. “I am going out, and the servants are all so busy.”

“Well, you may leave it, my dear, in passing. Don’t you go in; but merely leave the note with Mrs. Erne, at the school.”

A quarter of an hour later, the young girl, with fast-beating heart, set out on her errand.

Now, at last, she would hear what had been the result of his interview with that rich man whom he had supposed to be his father. Oh! if her mother could know the truth, she need not hesitate about receiving him as an equal!

Alma had only to pass through her father’s grounds, and cross the road, and there, before her, stood the modest school-house. Quite a tumult arose in her heart at the sight of it; but she did not yet confess, not even to herself, that all her hopes and joys were bound up with the young man who inhabited it.

And yet she trembled as she approached the door.

The young organist had not availed himself of the short interval of rest at mid-day to practice or take his usual ramble, but sat, his head buried in his hands, unheeding the lapse of time.

It was only when Mr. Erne knocked at the door of his room, saying, “Mr. Charles, here’s one of the ladies from Westerly House wants to speak to you,” that he looked up.

Then he followed her out; and there stood Alma, with sympathy and a thousand sweet emotions on her speaking face, a thousand gentle words in her adorable eyes.

Mrs. Erne vanished to her household duties, while Ronald came out into the strip of garden, and those two were alone together under the wintry sky.

"Here is a note from mamma," began Alma, in her soft, musical, girlish tone. "And, Mr. Charles, I beg of you not to refuse what she asks."

"I certainly will not," returned he, feeling a strange soothing of his bitter pain from her few words.

"Oh, thank you!" she went on, blushing a little under his gaze. "But you must now tell me how you got on the other day at Pinegrove. I have been so anxious to know."

"Anxious for me—for my affairs?" cried Ronald. "Then I am rewarded for my sufferings, and they have been far from slight this terrible week."

"Tell me what happened," she said, softly.

"Yes. Well, I went to Pinegrove, and got access to Sir Ronald. Miss Westerly, as sure as I stand here talking to you now he is my father—the father from whom I fled when I was a child, when you found me!"

Alma drew a sharp breath.

"And did you make yourself known?" she asked.

"No; a feeling I can hardly define told me to act more warily. I wrote to him, not yet enlightening him as to the fact that it is I who am his son, but recalling the incidents of our last day together, and saying that no chance had presented itself during the intervening years for any attempt to reconcile myself to him, but that I hoped that time had now arrived; and I gave an address in London which would find me. An old fellow-student at the training-school received the reply for me, but to him I explained nothing."

"And what—what does Sir Ronald say?" asked Alma.

"He denies altogether any knowledge of me. Let me get the letter for you. Here it is," he added, reappearing from the school-house just as a handsome open carriage slowly came driving along the road, and a middle-aged gentleman, its occupant, was taking a look at the gray spire of the little picturesque church.

"There!" cried Alma, breathlessly,—"there he is! There is Sir Ronald! We have invited him to stay with us for the theatricals, and over Christmas Day, and he has accepted. He is driving to our house."

There was a moment's silence between the young, imprudent pair.

Any one might have witnessed their interview; but they did not think of that.

"Shall I take any answer to mamma?" asked Alma, presently.

Then only Ronald broke open the note which Alma had brought, and his face flushed alike with pain and pleasure.

"Of course I shall do as Mrs. Westerly wishes, and shall try to acquit myself well," said he. "But I will write an answer, and leave it myself; that will be the correct thing to do. Ten thousand thanks for your kind sympathy. It will support me when I find myself under the same roof with the father who repudiates me!"

"But shall you not advance your claim?" asked Alma, anxiously.

"What proofs have I?" returned he. "But I will tell you, Miss Alma, that the first spare day I get I mean to run up to London, and consult a lawyer."

"Oh, do! do!" she urged. "And, Mr. Charles, I shall have something else I must say to you. It will not take long, but I am prevented staying to tell you now, so try to speak to me next week, when we shall all be helping to decorate the church."

"Most willingly," returned he.

"Good-by, then," said Alma, timidly offering her hand.

"Good-by, and—and I cannot, dare not say all I feel for your kind sympathy! I think it is that which keeps me alive!"

Another blush from Alma—another hand-clasp, and the incipient lovers had parted.

The young girl escaped to the shelter of her father's grounds, where she paced up and down the shrubbery, that she might give time for Ronald to send his note before she went in.

Night was falling gently when she rejoined the group assembled in the drawing-room. A large party, all talking with animation about the approaching gayeties, were drinking tea in the lofty, luxuriously-furnished saloon, and her mother called to her, cheerfully.

"It is all right, my dear; Mr. Charles will come. Why did you stay out so late? But it is a fine dry evening."

With what feelings did Alma receive Sir Ronald's greeting! He was thinking of Adeleade Westerly, who had made herself quite fascinating for his benefit; but he hurried forward to say a courteous word or two to the young daughter of the house.

"Surely I had the pleasure of a momentary glimpse of your fair face as I glanced up at the old church in passing an hour since?" said he. "Were you not at some house near?"

"At the school-house—yes," replied Alma. "I went to leave a note there."

"Then I was not mistaken! Ah! my dear young lady, you cannot guess how I appreciate this delightful buzz of conversation—this feeling of being part of a large circle—you never

can imagine how welcome it is to a lonely old bachelor."

Alma did not respond. She already disliked Sir Ronald. And what did he mean by calling himself "an old bachelor," if Ronald were his son? Surely he wanted to throw him off altogether! Cruel, cruel man! With what hot, indignant tears she had perused that letter of his just now in the shrubbery! But Ronald should have legal opinion on his case! Much less than twenty pounds would buy that, surely, and she would not fail to take him that much which she had saved from her yearly allowance. She could drop it into his hand when they were all decorating the church next week, or even sooner.

CHAPTER VII.

A PRINCE IN DISGUISE.

It is three or four hours later. Dinner is barely over, when Mr. Charles is announced.

Sir Ronald had taken Adelaide in to dinner, and been engrossed by her entirely.

"Now I must break off my interesting talk with you, Sir Ronald," said this scheming young woman, with a delicate sigh, "to go and instruct the schoolmaster in his part for the day after to-morrow. You throw such a light about old, worn-out theories, that I confess I go unwillingly; but I shall see you again."

"May not I accompany you, Miss Westerly?" asked the Baronet. "Do you suppose that I feel no regret at your absence?"

"Come, by all means," rejoined Adelaide.

They adjourned to the library, a large, long room, where Mrs. Westerly was already explaining to Mr. Charles the part he would have to sustain.

"You are to be a prince in disguise," said she. "I only hope the dress can be made to suit you; but you are so much slighter than Lord Vale, who was to have worn it."

"I think Mrs. Erne, at the school, could manage the dress. It would only be to take it in," he replied.

"I will have that done now, while I give you some coffee. They are all taking coffee in the saloon, and while you are drinking it, my maid and Miss Westerly's shall get to work just to stitch it in a bit."

Enter Sir Ronald and Adelaide Westerly.

"We have met before, I think, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Charles," interposed Mrs. Westerly.

"Ah, yes—Mr. Charles," resumed the Baronet. "I hope you caught no cold from the walk I occasioned you."

And then Mrs. Westerly heard the incident of the restored handkerchief, as they passed on into the saloon, where the gay visitors were talking and laughing, and drinking coffee.

"Let me introduce Mr. Charles, who is to

take the prince's part the evening after to-morrow," said Mrs. Westerly, to the group round her tea-table.

The ladies bowed.

Mr. Westerly came up, saying, "How d'ye do, Charles?" but nobody shook hands with the young man.

Alma *dared* not, but she hastened to approach him on pretense of offering him some sugar.

"Now your dress has been made wearable," said Mrs. Westerly, to him aside, when an uncomfortable half-hour had passed, during which no one but Alma had taken the trouble to say a word to him, "will you go and try how it does, please? And I will come and see what alterations have to be made to-morrow, for that is important."

Ronald quickly disappeared, not without exchanging a glance with Alma, who looked more tenderly beautiful than ever to-night, in her elegant white dress, wearing only by way of ornament a cream-colored hot-house rose at her throat and in her shining hair.

"What a good-looking fellow! Who is he?"

"The schoolmaster!"

"Why, he looks like a nobleman born, or a real prince in disguise! How did you get hold of him, Westerly? He's quite out of the common run, surely!"

Such were the comments Alma heard on all sides when Ronald had disappeared, and she felt a glow of interest and excitement which ought to have warned her that her heart was bound up with the young man's fate. But Alma told herself that it was only the interest she felt in his success—in him whom she had found a famished, homeless boy in the wood.

"He makes a most *capital* prince," said Mrs. Westerly, coming back a few moments after; "and Adelaide will make a beautiful princess! Really, in his Spanish hat and drooping feathers, with his black velvet doublet, you could not know Mr. Charles, the schoolmaster."

"But will he do his part well? Can he learn it in time?—for that is the great point?" asked Mr. Westerly.

"Oh, Lord Vale was quite right! Our schoolmaster will bear his part to perfection. He will improvise where he forgets a sentence. And he has all the wit to do so. Alma, I want you to put on your dress as a cottage maiden, and just say your few sentences—it will help the part. Come to the library, dear, where Adelaide is instructing young Charles. Sir Ronald is there, looking on."

"Yes, mamma," said Alma; and soon she presented herself in the library in a charming print robe, a picturesque cap hiding the roses in her golden tresses, a basket on her round white arms, which were bare.

And there stood Ronald, in his rich dress and plumed hat, personating the prince, who

was supposed to be wretched on account of the princess's coldness. It was the part of the village maiden to set things right for this interesting couple by meeting the prince (for whom she watches) in the woods, and bringing him a letter which clears up all mysteries.

"Did you ever see anything so perfect as the way in which he personates the prince's despair?" whispered Mrs. Westerly aside to Sir Ronald. "He has assumed an expression of misery to the life as he looks at Alma!"

Ah, yes! But it was no mock despair. As his father's hard, cold eyes watched him, Ronald almost fancied that that father had recognized him, and rejoiced in his subordinate position; almost imagined that he was aware of his adoration of Alma, and delighted in the distance which separated them.

It took no forced action to throw into his face the agony he actually felt.

"Sir Ronald, come and help me, please!" cried Adelaide, from the ante-room; and just then Mrs. Westerly was called away by a servant. Ronald and Alma remained alone.

"Oh, I have so longed to tell you not to despair too soon!" exclaimed Alma, softly. "I have so much wished to tell you why it was that I wanted to say a word to you in the church. You must get a legal opinion—indeed, you must! That will cost money, I know, but I have twenty pounds ready for that, and unless you wish to break my heart you must not refuse to take them. For it is my money—my very own, and I have set my heart on your using it!"

He had approached her, and now held her hand.

"I must not allow myself to despair if you forbid me to do so," said he; "otherwise how should I bear what I feel to-night? Oh, it is bitter to see oneself shut out from a rightful position; counted not fit to associate with one's equals! Above all, not to dare to utter one's dearest hopes! Oh, I have so much, too, that I am dying to say to you. Something that is always in my heart, night and day. And yet I have no hope that I may ever utter it. Oh! what I suffer!"

"But—but," stammered Alma, as he held her hand faster, "you will not refuse to take the scant help I offer you? To me it is nothing; and think how rewarded I should feel if you were placed in the road toward making Sir Ronald acknowledge you!"

For an answer, the disguised prince bent and kissed the fair hand of the village maiden. And that lovely damsel was not offended. She was covered with unwonted blushes, but made no movement indicative of resentment.

The prince had murmured "Forgive me!" and stepped back a pace, and but just in time, for in the doorway appeared the cynical face of the Baronet, his father. Had he seen what

had passed? The poor village maiden was in a tremor of confusion, but the prince stood immovable, outwardly calm, while Sir Ronald, advanced into the room.

"The princess sent me to say she would return directly, but a string of pearls became loosened, and she is having them re-strung," said he, carelessly. "Miss Alma, that simple dress suits you to perfection, if you will permit an old man to say so. Or is it only the young men nowadays who are pardoned for any dereliction from what is correct and proper?"

Alma trembled at these words. Had he indeed witnessed Ronald's hasty, unpremeditated kiss? But a moment after the young girl recovered herself, and the baronet was, apparently, as courteous and as unenlightened as before this agitating episode.

And now Mrs. Westerly, carried away by her eagerness to make the amateur performance go off well, took Mr. Charles aside, and begged him to give the village children a whole holiday to-morrow, and to be up at her house early in the morning to rehearse his part.

What opportunities that morrow would afford for glimpses of—nay, exchange of words with—his beloved!

Yes, come what might, she was his soul's beloved, and a wild thrill of hope made him ask himself if he were, unconsciously, loved in return. For those few hours he gave himself up to the joy of finding himself in her presence.

At luncheon he had the happiness to sit beside her (for Mrs. Westerly was too busy to allow him to return to the school), and immediately afterward there was a private rehearsal, in which Alma, in her character of humble peasant girl, had to offer him violets, and make him beseeching speeches, while her blue orbs looked at him with entreaty.

The rehearsal was over before Mrs. Westerly's dinner hour, and that lady took leave of him most graciously.

"Be with us in good time to-morrow, Mr. Charles," said she. "Our play is to begin at nine punctually."

"I will be here at eight," returned he.

"We are so much obliged to you," she added.

And then he quitted the house, and was shut out from the glory of Alma's presence.

Yes; shut out indeed; for henceforward it could not happen to him to come into contact with the beautiful, high-born young lady; so, even if she loved him—

What an exalting thought! Did he dare to hope so much? Ah! he was shut out from her presence; but he had caught sight of her as she descended the staircase, dressed for the evening. How lovely, in her pale cream-colored robe, all light and shimmering, and garnished with knots of rose-color! And as he ventured a furtive, timid glance, she had raised her eyes, and given him an enchanting smile by way of adieu.

Could he feel quite despairing after such a priceless gift as a smile from Alma Westerly?

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. ERNE'S TIDINGS.

THE much-talked-of performance was over, and had been immensely successful. Mrs. Westerly's guests were loud in praise of the performers, and Mrs. Westerly herself was delighted.

"And who *was* that charming prince?"

This question had been asked so repeatedly that the gratified hostess grew weary of answering it.

"How very cleverly he rendered his part! It was easy to see he had spent time on it to please his audience. Such acting could only have been the result of real care and continual repetition."

"No doubt," said Adelaide with a smile, taking care, however, not to enlighten her questioners on the first point.

Sir Ronald, who had kept close to her side, smiled too.

"How wrongly we judge things sometimes," said he, in a low tone. "You have covered yourself with plaudits, Mr. Charles," added he, "and are going away crowned with victory. For myself," he continued, with a meaning smile, "you have succeeded in convincing me that your *forte* is that of an actor, and of a very good actor, too. I am quite happy to have made your acquaintance. We shall, no doubt, hear of you again in this part some day."

What did he mean?—or, rather, what did his tone, so subtly cynical, convey?

Ronald bowed to the Baronet, to Mrs. Westerly (of whom he had already taken leave), and to Adelaide Westerly; and lingering in vain for another glance of Alma, took his way out through the hall.

"Good-night, Mr. Charles," said a soft voice.

And there she stood, the object of all his hopes.

"Good-night," said he, devouring her with his eyes.

For one moment he grasped her slender fingers in his—for one moment raised them respectfully to his lips, and then was gone.

The next day he went up to London, and seeking his friend, John Somers, asked him to tell him of some dependable lawyer whom he might consult.

"You've not been getting into trouble, I hope, Charles?" questioned this Mentor.

"No, no; but I want a knotty point solved."

"Humph! I could always take your word; but you look as if you were in some difficulty."

"A man may have trouble without any wrong-doing, or getting himself into it, Somers. Do you know of a good man I could consult?"

Yes, Somers knew of such a man; and Ronald was soon in the office of this great personage.

He stated his case very briefly; Mr. Temple, the lawyer, listening in silence till the tale was told.

Then he summed up briefly, as follows:—

"You want to ascertain whether it is possible to force your father to acknowledge you; or, failing that, to prove that you are his son? Now, of course, when you tell me your real name, a little time to consult the registers of baptism at Somerset House would be all that is necessary to prove the birth; but more than this would be required to prove your identity. You say you ran away from your father; that it is years since you saw him till within the last week or so; that you have no papers to prove your relationship. Then there is but one thing to do."

"And that?" cried Ronald.

"To find your mother."

There was a short silence.

"I have explained," said Ronald, "that for the last five years all my efforts have been directed toward that end. Since the age of fifteen I have worked for nothing else. For that I have managed to save money; for that have advertised in foreign papers and in the *Times*, and have been twice to Paris. But never, till during the summer of this year, could I gain any tidings whatever of her. I then inquired at the head office of the police in Paris, as I was told that those authorities could ascertain the whereabouts of any inhabitant of that city. After many weeks I received a reply (sent me to England), by which I learned that a lady, bearing my mother's name, had lived for a whole year with a relative there, but had left fully three months since."

"How unfortunate!" remarked Mr. Temple; "but go on advertising. In the absence of all other proof, she alone can identify you. Some likeness to what you were in childhood must surely be detected by a mother, and your knowledge of what passed in your youthful days would help to clear up all doubts. Cannot you get at any of your old servants?"

"I fear not," said Ronald, "as we moved about a good deal for the last three years after my father gave up our country home. Stay! there is my nurse. She was with my mother till the last—till twelve months before I ran away."

"Advertise also for that woman, and if you obtain any reply, and determine to pursue the matter further, then come to me again; but in that case it will be necessary to confide the case to me fully, giving every particular in your power."

Ronald thanked him, paid his fee, and took his departure. Before leaving London he sent

advertisements to two or three newspapers, as the lawyer had advised, and then took the train for Westerly.

Evening had long closed in, and the winter night reigned supreme, when Ronald arrived at the village school—his home. Mrs. Erne met him with a cheerful smile.

"You must be glad to get home, Mr. Charles, this cold night," said she, "and you'll find a bright fire, and your supper ready. Dear, I'm glad for your sake there's no practicing at the church to-night, for you've been journeying all day, I'll be bound."

Ronald thanked her, and said a few pleasant words in return, though his mind was ill at ease.

"And now I wonder whether I shall be the first to tell you the great news, or whether you've heard it as you came along?" continued Mrs. Erne.

"I have heard no news whatever," returned Ronald; "so I shall certainly hear it, whatever it is, first from you."

"What!" cried she, well pleased to have the telling of the tidings which had so much excited her. "You never came from the station without hearing a word or two of what's been going on up at Westerly House?"

"Even so," replied Ronald, smiling. "I came along at a smart pace, and met no one in the fog."

"Then you've not heard?" cried she, triumphantly. "Well, there's to be a wedding at Westerly House!"

"A wedding?" echoed Ronald, faintly.

"Guess now, Mr. Charles, which of the ladies it is?"

The young fellow's heart stood still while his cheek blanched. Which? To his mind there was but one whom it could be—the lovely Alma, whom, but a few short hours ago, he had dared to hope thought of him.

"Tell me!" he gasped, and could say no more.

"La, Mr. Charles! 'tis such fun to guess a bit—at least, to my mind. However, you gentlemen are not like us women; and I expect you want to rest and have your supper, so I'll just tell you right out. 'Tis Miss Adelaide who's to be married at last, and a handsome bride she'll make; and not more than twenty-seven, at the outside."

Miss Adelaide! The relief was so great that he laughed outright.

"Now, Mr. Charles, you'll have to guess who the gentleman is she's going to marry?" cried Mrs. Erne.

Ronald guessed as desired, but always received a "no" for answer.

"After all, I shall have to name the bridegroom, too," said Mrs. Erne. "'Tis no other, then, than Sir Ronald Normanloe! Won't Miss

Adelaide be mistress of a fine place? Fancy her going to live at Pinegrove!"

"Sir Ronald! going to marry Sir Ronald!" stammered the young fellow, scarcely knowing what he said or what he did. His father going to marry Adelaide Westerly!—his father! And in all probability his mother still alive. She was certainly living a few months since. Oh, at all risks to himself, he must save the Westerly family from the misery that threatened them.

"It can't be possible!" said he; aloud.

"But why not, Mr. Charles?" asked Mrs. Erne, much surprised at the way in which her good news was received.

"She—they—have only just been introduced; that is, it seems but so short a time ago that he came here."

"La! that's nothing, Mr. Charles," cried the good-natured widow. "Hav'n't you never heard say, 'Happy the wooing, that's not long a doing?' and I incline to think it's a true saying, too. Why, in my lifetime, I've known more than two or three couples married and happy who'd never set eyes on each other more than three or four times before they settled the wedding-day. So why not Miss Adelaide and Sir Ronald? She's not to say an old bride, but twenty-seven ain't seventeen, now, is it?"

Alone in his small apartment—so orderly, so scrupulously arranged, showing here and there evidences of refined taste—Ronald sunk down in despair.

"I must prevent it!" said he, mentally. "But how?"

Ah, how? Widely as they had been dissevered, Ronald shrank from the idea of saying anything to his own father's discredit—of hinting that he might have a wife still living.

"I must then tell him myself. I must tell him that my mother was certainly living a year ago. If he has sure proofs of her death, of course, I shall have nothing else to say; no right to stop this marriage."

Poor Ronald! It saddened him, even after the lapse of so many years, to think that his mother might possibly be dead.

She had not been one of those mothers who cling to a child through all disaster; but she had tried to make her son happy while she had had him with her, and he remembered her gentle ways with fond regret.

But it was a time for action, not for mere regrets. His father was about to marry Adelaide Westerly? There was no time for delay.

Then it suddenly recurred to him that there must be a mistake, and he said as much to Mrs. Erne when that good woman came in to remove his supper-tray.

"Oh! as to any mistake, Mr. Charles, you'll see it's right enough to-morrow. The whole

village is ringing with the news, and Mrs. Westerly is so pleased! And the wedding is to take place before February. I can tell you that much for certain."

Before February!—and Christmas was now at hand.

"I ought not to lose a single day. Before this time to-morrow I must have taken steps to prevent this marriage," thought he.

With this agitating decision in his heart, Ronald closed his exciting day.

CHAPTER IX.

DISMISSED.

LIKE one in a strange dream, the young fellow prepared to go through the daily routine of duties next day.

He was not long left to suppose that there might be a mistake in Mrs. Erne's tidings; for the very children in the school commented on the approaching wedding.

"We shall have a holiday, and a grand dinner, and a tea, and no end of games!" grinned one boy.

And his companion took up the theme.

When morning school was over, Ronald purposely went into the village—purposely lingered to talk with the first person he met.

Oh, there could be no doubt! Every one had heard of the impending wedding; every one was full of the grand doings that would be sure to follow.

Afternoon school began, and came to an end. How, was a problem which Ronald could barely solve. The dusk of a December afternoon was already stealing over the landscape, as Ronald hastily prepared to undertake the painful matter he had in hand—namely, to see his father, and stop the proposed marriage.

As he passed by the imposing entrance which led to Westerly House, he sighed, and gave the mansion a long look, thinking of her he loved.

How he longed to tell her of his interview with Mr. Temple—of his present errand. And as he formed the wish, behold! there was Alma herself, wrapped in furs, crossing the carriage drive.

He stopped. The young lady paused, then hurried toward him.

"Oh, Mr. Charles!" said Alma, breathlessly; "I came at all risks to ask how you fared yesterday. You consulted a lawyer, I hope?"

"Yes, yes. He tells me that the difficulty will be to prove my identity with that of Sir Ronald's son, as I have no letters, no papers, and was so young when I left my father," replied Ronald, in agitated tones.

"How sorry I am! Oh, how sorry for your trouble!" said she.

They were now standing beside the huge stem of a tree in the avenue which formed the approach to the house; and this and the falling gloom sheltered them from observation.

"Since I consulted Mr. Temple, since my journey yesterday," continued Ronald, coming closer to her side, "a new trouble has assailed me; a trouble which, alas! concerns you and yours."

Alma looked at him alike with wonder and with tender sympathy.

"It concerns us?" said she, softly.

"In this way," returned he. "For it is true, is it not, that Miss Westerly, your aunt, is now engaged to my father?"

"Yes. It was all settled so hurriedly. But my mother is much pleased," said Alma, timidly.

"But—but," stammered he, "only a year since my mother was living."

Alma fell back a pace, terrified.

She uttered a suppressed cry.

"I am now going to see my father, to tell him this fact; to ask for definite proof of my poor mother's death. If he can show that he knows her to be no longer living, then he is blameless."

"Ah!—then—yes!" gasped the young girl, still trembling.

Then there was silence, and the winter wind came with a moan round the bare tree trunks, and the gloom deepened.

No one disturbed their solitude; and as they thus stood together, how could Ronald forget that he had once dared to press his lips on the hand of the fair girl at his side? How could she not remember that kiss, those looks and tones, which told her of his love?

In spite of the trouble at his heart, of the uncertainty in hers, what a moment of happiness it was for both of them, that brief space in which they found joy in each other's presence!

"I must not linger," said Alma, breaking silence.

"Wish me success," returned he. "That success that comes of doing a difficult task worthily."

"Indeed I will do that from my heart!" breathed she, gently.

Then, how did it happen? Was it the solitude, the falling night, the voice of the wind rushing by, that gave him courage, or was it love which impelled him? He took her fingers in his, and left on them another kiss—passionate, tender, devoted.

The glow had not fled from his heart when he neared Pinegrove. But as the large pile loomed dimly through the frosty air, that necessity there was of doing his difficult task well, claimed precedence over even the sweet remembrance of his love.

With a strange thrill of feeling he once more rung at the entrance, and asked if he could see Sir Ronald Normanloe. As before, the servant who took his name ushered him into the same handsome apartment; and, as

before, there sat the Baronet sipping tea by the welcome fire-light.

It seemed to the young man that he was being taken through precisely the same scene he had enacted but a few days before. But this time the business he had in hand was stern, and not to be lightly disposed of.

Sir Ronald replaced his china cup on the silver tray as "Mr. Charles" was announced.

Perhaps he was a shade surprised at the visit; if so, he did not betray the feeling.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Charles. Pray sit down. Let me offer you some tea," began the Baronet.

"No, thank you—no tea," said Ronald. "I come on serious business!"

"Really! But why should business prevent you taking a cup of tea this cold evening?"

"Sir Ronald," said the young man, in a broken voice, "it has become my very painful duty to allude to-night to circumstances which may interfere with your projected marriage with Miss Westerly!"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Sir Ronald, with cold surprise. "Will you, sir, explain how that could possibly be?"

The servant had withdrawn, leaving the two alone in the warm, lofty, and richly-furnished room.

The fire-light played alike on the agitated features and noble brow of the younger man, and on the hard, impassive face of the elder one.

"It is my duty to do so!" cried Ronald. "Sir," he continued, "I can no longer preserve my character of a stranger to you! I am your son—the boy who left you nearly eleven years since!"

The elder man remained imperturbable.

He slightly elevated his eyebrows, and remarked coldly, "Pardon me for not instantly replying to your exquisitely rendered appeal, Mr. Charles. But some forgiveness may be granted to my momentary astonishment, surely? Put yourself in my place, Mr. Charles, and imagine yourself to have shortly taken up your abode in a new neighborhood, and that you find yourself quietly taking tea, when a visitor comes, who introduces himself as your son! Ah! I was correct in assuring you that your vocation was that of a successful actor!"

"Father," cried the unhappy Ronald—"for you *are* my father, and you *do* remember how we parted!—it is my duty to warn you solemnly of your position! My mother was known to be living one year ago! How can you marry Miss Westerly while my mother is still in existence?"

Sir Ronald stared at him coldly.

"What can your estimable mother have to do with my approaching marriage with Miss Westerly?" asked he.

"Have you proofs of my mother's death?

If not, you must stop this proposed alliance—you must cancel the engagement at whatever cost!" said the young man, in a piercing voice of despair. "Oh, father, you may refuse all else, but this you must tell me—is my mother indeed dead?"

"Really, Mr. Charles, you must allow me to say that I had not expected this treat in private; this splendid acting deserves a larger audience. I am quite interested in the question of what is to happen next!"

Ronald paced the room in cruel agitation.

"Father," he cried, "have you lost all human feeling? I do not expect affection: you never gave me that! But I have a right to interpose to save this young lady, the near connection of people who have befriended me, and given me the means of gaining an honorable livelihood. It is my duty to stop this marriage from going on, unless you can show me that my mother is no longer alive!"

"I regret that I have no means of satisfying you on this point, Mr. Charles, as I am unacquainted with your (no doubt) estimable parent; and I repeat that the fact of her being alive can have nothing to do with my approaching marriage with Miss Westerly."

"Are you indeed my father, and can you preserve such a tone to me—your only son?" cried Ronald, almost beside himself. "I have come to you now to say these words between ourselves. Prove to me that my mother is dead, and I will not seek to prevent your marriage. I will say nothing against it. In coming to you privately I have shown my desire to save you the pain of being talked about in this place where your home is now, and where you have a position in the county—"

"Mr. Charles," replied Sir Ronald, slowly, "as you appear to be in earnest, I must—however greatly I may be surprised—reply to you seriously. Allow me to assure you that I am not a married man, though I hope shortly to become one. Let me impress you with the assurance that I never was married! You will, perhaps, pardon me now if I take a somewhat abrupt leave of you, as I have to dress and dine at Westerly House to-night. Good-evening!"

He rung the bell, and rose.

A servant entered immediately.

"Open the door for Mr. Charles!" said the Baronet; "and let the carriage come round at a quarter past seven precisely."

"Yes, Sir Ronald," replied the servant, holding open the door for Ronald's exit.

CHAPTER X.

"WHAT IS IT ABOUT?"

THE wind had risen, and a chill, though light, fall of snow was drifting down, and Ro-

nald staggered blindly into it, scarcely conscious of whither he went.

But we will not follow him now. Our scene changes to one of warmth and comfort;—luxurious surroundings; bright lights in silver candelabra; hot-house flowers; costly pictures, which look down out of rich frames.

We are in the large drawing-room of Westerly House.

Gathered there is only a family party; but they are spending the hours enjoyably together.

Sir Ronald Normanloe is the only guest, and he is soon to become one of the family circle.

Never has he been more conversable, or in gayer mood, than to-night. Even Alma, knowing secretly what she does know about him, listens when he speaks. He keeps up a constant flow of agreeable talk; and Mr. and Mrs. Westerly think that Adelaide has been very fortunate at last in her matrimonial prospects.

Adelaide herself has never looked handsomer. She is, indeed, brilliant this evening, and wears a rich dress of dark velvet, with collarette and ear-drops of sapphires, the gift of her bride-groom elect.

All her life it has been her ambition to secure a well-defined position—a wealthy husband; and now her ambition is satisfied.

But Alma looks rather like a fair flower—exceeding fair; but hiding some secret sadness. As such, she is touchingly beautiful; and as she sits near her mother, of whom she is somewhat in awe, and listens to the howling of the wind, her heart follows Ronald.

A thousand times she asks herself what can have taken place between the father and son in their interview of this afternoon. Ah, surely it is not Ronald who was triumphed, or the Baronet could not be so thoroughly at ease?

The tears steal again and again into Alma's blue eyes, as she bends over her embroidery.

It is late when Sir Ronald at length tears himself away from Miss Westerly's side; eleven o'clock has already tolled out upon the night.

"Why, it is blowing a gale!" said Mr. Westerly, accompanying his guest to the door.

"No matter! I have a stout pair of horses in my brougham, and will soon be at Pine-grove," answered Sir Ronald, cheerily.

"We would have persuaded you to stay here for to-night, if we had known this sort of weather was coming on," said Mr. Westerly. "Will you send your carriage back now, and not face the gale?"

"A thousand thanks, my dear Westerly, but I shall not feel the weather in my snug brougham. Good-night—good-by!"

The door of the drawing room was open, and the ladies had risen to retire for the night when Mr. Westerly re-entered.

"'Tis a rough night—a very rough night," remarked he. "I wish we had thought of asking him to sleep as well as dine."

Alma was about to say good-night to her father, when a footman appeared somewhat hastily.

"Mr. Charles begs you will be kind enough to see him for a few moments, sir."

"What, to-night? So late as it is?" cried Mr. Westerly.

"Mr. Charles will think it very kind if you could see him to-night, sir. He says the business is urgent."

"I suppose it is. Show him into the study, Marks."

"My dear, he can come and speak to you here. We are all going to bed," said Mrs. Westerly.

"Then show Mr. Charles in here."

"Yes, sir," responded Marks.

And so it happened that as Alma followed her mother and Adelaide out of the room, she caught a glimpse of Ronald's white face as he passed in.

Only a glimpse; but that was enough to tell her that he was suffering keenly—that he looked changed and ill. What could have happened?

The young girl ascended the stairs in a tremor of nervous agitation. Oh, that she could pierce the closed door, and know what was going on below!

"Well, what is it, Charles, to send you here at this hour on such a night? Nothing serious, I hope? Why, how ill you look! Here, sit down! Now tell me what it is?"

Ronald essayed to speak, but at first no words came.

"What is it that has changed you thus?" cried Mr. Westerly. "You are not yourself, Charles!"

He was not, indeed! Extreme agitation, grief, a sense of his inability to bring proofs of that which he was about to advance, all weighed him to the earth; and, more than all, his father's coldness and hardness of heart had struck him with a mortal chill.

"Sir," cried he, in a hoarse tone, "I am deeply grieved to pain you and yours; but it must be! You will see that yourself when you know all!"

"What is it about?" asked Mr. Westerly, puzzled and somewhat alarmed.

"It concerns myself and Sir Ronald Normanloe!"

"Sir Ronald? Have you any connexion with him?" asked Mr. Westerly, greatly surprised.

"The very closest! He is my father!"

"What?" cried Mr. Westerly, starting from his seat.

"He is my father!" repeated Ronald, firmly.

"Do you know what you are saying, Charles?" said Mr. Westerly, doubting whether the young fellow was in his right mind.

"Too well! Oh, sir, I will try to tell you very briefly, for it has become necessary that you should be fully informed of everything. You remember the day you found me in the wood?"

"Yes, yes!" assented Mr. Westerly.

"On that day I had run away from my father. He was then Mr. Normanloe, and all but penniless. Child as I was, I fled from him in terror, because he had insisted that I *should beg*—and I refused! He was harsh, cruel; and I said to myself that I would creep away somewhere to die! My terror of my father was so great that when questioned as to my name I avoided giving my surname, and so it was supposed that I was named Charles, which is really my second baptismal name. As years went on, and I grew old enough to think for myself, I was still afraid to tell my real parentage; but I pined to find my mother, who is a French lady, and who, wearied out with unkindness, had left my father and returned to some relatives abroad."

Mr. Westerly, who had been listening with knit brows, gave a start at the mention of Ronald's mother.

"And then?" said he.

"Then I never heard or saw aught of my father from the time I crept into the wood here to die, till a short time since (we may count the days)—the evening he came to Pinegrove. I was coming from the church, and saw a handsome carriage drawn up by the roadside; and a servant seated on the box asked me the way to Pinegrove. As I was about to answer, a gentleman looked from the window of the carriage, and I immediately recognized my father."

"This is a strange tale you are telling me, Charles. You will have to substantiate it, you know," said Mr. Westerly, who knew not what to believe, but who feared that the story was perfectly true.

"Hear me to the end, sir. I made a pretext for going to Pinegrove, to make sure that I had made no mistake. Assured of that, I next consulted a London lawyer—withholding my real name. It will be easy to prove by the baptismal registers that the present Sir Ronald Normanloe had a son. The difficulty will be in proving my identity with that son. For I was a child when I fled from my father on the hill. I have no papers, nothing as proof positive to strangers. But, sir, if I could find my mother, I should then be able to prove this identity!"

"What!—is she still living? You do not mean to tell me that?" cried Mr. Westerly, in great agitation.

"That is why I have intruded upon you at

this hour!" cried Ronald, in desperate tones.

"My mother was living a year since! I have never traced out her whereabouts, but have ascertained that much! Consider, sir, what a shock it was to me to hear of my father's contemplated marriage with Miss Westerly!"

"What a blow for my sister!" murmured Mr. Westerly. "How did he dare to present himself here as he has done, if this be true?"

"Sir, I have tried to spare you this pain and annoyance," said Ronald. "I sought an interview with my father this very afternoon, and told him who I was, and that I knew my mother to be living a year since. I implored him to give me proofs of her death, engaging to be silent if he would do that, and thus let his engagement with Miss Westerly remain undisturbed. But he would not hear me; he set his face as a granite rock, declared he knew nothing of me nor of my mother—asserted that he had never been married!"

To poor Ronald's intense dismay, he observed Mr. Westerly's face show sudden relief.

"Depend upon it, Charles, there is some mistake altogether," said he. "A man of Sir Ronald Normanloe's position would hardly run the risk of engaging to marry into a family of position if he had a wife still living. You are aware that it can be ascertained whether Sir Ronald ever was married? Now, he assures you that he never has been. Depend upon it, there is some mistake."

"Sir, I cannot mistake my own father—that is not possible!" cried Ronald. "And I traced my mother so far as to be assured she was living but a year ago. You will, surely, ascertain that Sir Ronald is not still a married man—that my mother is no longer alive, before you allow Miss Westerly's engagement to continue?"

"Of course I shall; it will be my duty, Charles. But I may tell you beforehand that I feel certain there is an error. You were so young when you came to us, so many years have passed since then, that you may well have mistaken a person bearing a strong resemblance to your father for your father himself. You see, Sir Ronald has assured you he never was married; and it is possible that there may be two people in the world bearing the name of Normanloe."

"Sir, I have told you that I recognize my father. However, consult the registers at Somerset House. Demand proof—full proof—before you allow the marriage to take place. I tell you, sir, I would not have disturbed you with my personal wrongs had I not felt it imperative that you should at once be enlightened for Miss Westerly's sake."

"I am most truly sorry for you," returned Mr. Westerly; "and of course I shall seek an interview with Sir Roland Normanloe at the earliest possible moment to-morrow. Till that

has taken place, I will refrain from disturbing my sister's peace of mind. Immediately after I have seen Sir Ronald I will speak to you again. Go home now, and try to get a little rest. You look really ill, poor fellow!"

Ronald rose wearily.

"I will not detain you longer at this hour, sir; but be on your guard with my father, and search into the truth of what I say. He is unscrupulous, as you will find."

And then the unhappy young man once more passed out into the cold and darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

SIR RONALD EXPLAINS.

A SNOWY mantle covered the ground, and had powdered the noble old trees clustering about Pinegrove with wondrous beauty, as Mr. Westerly approached that picturesque place early next day on his embarrassing visit.

The large old house, with its rows of mulloined windows, looked fair and imposing in the morning sunlight.

"It will be hard if Adelaide is to lose such a place, such a home as this! But, undoubtedly, there is a mistake," mused he, as he rung at the entrance. "However, of course I must satisfy myself now that all is right before her engagement can proceed."

Sir Ronald was yet at breakfast, and looked up with a pleased surprise when Mr. Westerly was announced.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, my dear Westerly!" exclaimed he, throwing aside his newspaper, and rising with eagerness to welcome his guest. "Come round by the fire. I hope you have brought a good appetite for breakfast. John, bring some hot toast!"

"I have breakfasted, thank you, and will let you finish yours before I open my business," returned Mr. Westerly.

"Nothing is amiss with you or yours, I hope? How is Adelaide?" asked Sir Ronald, quickly.

"We are all well as when you left us; and Adelaide appears even more blooming than last night. No; there is nothing amiss with us. Finish your breakfast."

The Baronet drank his coffee, declaring that he was quite at leisure.

"Come into my library; there we can talk all the morning, if you will, undisturbed," said Sir Ronald, rising with alacrity.

It was not till the two were seated in the comfortably-furnished library that Mr. Westerly began his difficult task.

"You asked if anything was amiss with us, and I said no. Well, there is nothing with us; and yet, last night, immediately after you had left us, I heard a story which was calculated to startle us very much indeed. Of course, I believe that there is some annoying

mistake; but as it concerns the interests of my own sister so nearly, it is my duty to sift matters, and prove the tale to be incorrect."

"Do you mean that this story affects Adelaide?" asked Sir Ronald, quickly.

"Indirectly, since she is engaged to marry you. Chiefly it concerns yourself."

"Indeed! Pray let me hear it!" cried Sir Ronald.

"That is why I have come off at once without throwing my sister into any, doubtless, unnecessary agitation. To be brief, then, the schoolmaster and organist of my village, young Charles, came to me late last night. He says that he is your son."

"Whe-e-w!" exclaimed Sir Ronald, starting up.

"There is a mistake, of course," continued Mr. Westerly; "but the poor fellow was in great trouble, and the affair must be cleared up."

"Well?" questioned the Baronet, calmly resuming his seat.

"Well, he says also that he fled from you when he was only eight or nine years old; that his mother had previously left you; and that he gave his name as Charles in terror lest you should find him."

"He seems to have been not less clever as a boy than as a young man," interrupted the Baronet, ironically. "And now he wants to come and live here, I suppose, and be recognized as my successor. If he succeeds in that, he will be *very clever indeed!*"

"Well, it is annoying, of course; but how do you explain it, Normanloe? For the awkward part is that he declares his mother to be still living, or that she was certainly living a year ago. In the state of mind he is in, poor fellow, he will set the tale going all over the country, and it will have to be refuted before you and Adelaide can be married. You see, you *have* assured him very positively that you never were married; and yet he persists in asserting the reality of his story, because he believes in it thoroughly. It is very painful."

"My dear Westerly, this is more than a mere mistake; it is a deep-laid scheme against me."

"Impossible!" cried Mr. Westerly. "The poor fellow has lived all his life in the village, and is universally well thought of. Besides, he is so young. He must, at least, honestly believe in what he advances."

"This young man, whoever he may be, is, in my opinion, making a desperate effort to win a name and position. You ask what for? Not merely for the sake of those coveted things, but because they will be stepping-stones toward the summit of his wishes. It will be my turn now to startle you, but I cannot help

it. He wishes to be acknowledged as my son, to break off my engagement with Miss Westerly, because he is madly in love—or in love from interested motives—with your daughter Alma."

"What!" cried Mr. Westerly, profoundly moved. "Oh, Normanloe," added he, a moment later, "you are deceived! He could not hope to gain such a prize by such means. Besides, he cannot believe that she would listen to his suit for a moment."

"Pardon me, but he knows that she would! He is sure of her affection. Question your daughter, and see if she can deny her love for the village schoolmaster."

"You make me terribly anxious when you speak so confidently!" cried Alma's father, rising abruptly, and pacing the room.

"I am very sorry, but what can I do? I must place certain plain facts before you now in the turn affairs have taken. The very day I first came over to stay at Westerly House, I saw (by chance as I drove by the church) this young fellow talking to Miss Alma, and I am certain he was even then in correspondence with her. I noticed as they stood on the little hillock together—he much too close to her side—a letter slipped into her hand. Oh! there is more for you to hear. The night of the theatricals I came suddenly into the room, and detected him kissing her hand."

"The young villain!" ejaculated the magistrate.

"We next hear of him setting up this story; and now I pick *that* to pieces," continued the Baronet. "Far be it from me to be hard on any one, much more on any one so young as he. I have even tried to think that he himself has been imposed on with the belief that he *is* my son. But you shall judge. And now, Westerly, I shall have to confess a youthful folly. But who among us is quite free from folly of some kind or other? Mine, unhappily for myself, has borne fruit for me, in the shape of the distracting fear that Adelaide may not see the matter in its actual light."

"Need she be told? Need she be troubled?" asked Mr. Westerly.

"Of that *you* must be the judge; but spare me if you can. Westerly, when I was young—only four-and-twenty—I fell in love with a beautiful French girl without a penny. She was a Romanist; but I thought nothing of that. I was only anxious to marry her; and we were married, as I thought, by license, in London.

"A short time passed, and I found her extravagant, wholly unsuited, by temper and disposition, for my wife; moreover, that she pined to undo the tie which bound us.

"But what could that avail now? I had, as I supposed married her, and wished to do the best I could for her and her child.

"All of a sudden, when troubles came—the bank failure, and other money difficulties—my devoted wife left me, with the avowed determination of never seeing me again—and never returning to England.

"She went to relatives in France, first sending the child to other relatives of hers in England, who were eager to adopt him. What was I to do? Complete ruin had come upon me. My supposed wife rejoiced to leave me; my boy had a chance of being well cared for. How could I care for him, when I was without means or time to devote to him? He had never clung to me, and, for the boy's sake, I let him go."

"From that day to this I have never heard a word of the lady whom I imagined to be my wife. Twelve years is a long time for her to have been silent if she cared to hear news of me, or to renew our tie.

"But, eight years since, chance made it clear to me that she had never been my wife in reality. Under age as she was, and a Roman Catholic to boot, the omission of the ceremony being performed also according to Roman Catholic rites, rendered the marriage invalid.

"When she left me, she declared that nothing should ever make her see me again, or live in England; that she wished nothing so much as a complete severance of our union; that she entirely concurred in the wish of her relations in England, who desired to adopt her boy; that she was eager to consign him to their care as the only provision for him.

"Would not any one, then, have done as I did? Could I force my so-called wife to stay with me—I who had not the means to support her? Could I hamper myself with a young boy who had been taught to hate his father—I who had not then any prospect of putting food into that child's mouth?

"I bowed to necessity; but when time had healed the pain I felt, I recognized with relief the fact that I had never been legally married. That page in my life has long been turned over—altogether done with, and I should never have heard a word relating to it save for my accession to wealth and title. Think what a chance for any lad, especially one so aspiring as this young organist, to step in and take his place as heir to Pinegrove! Of course the story of my former supposed marriage has got wind, and some one has made him believe himself my son, or else (in the desperate desire to raise himself to a level with your daughter) he has come to make this claim on me. But *he is not* my son; and even if he were, could not inherit Pinegrove or the baronetcy (of which a series of unexpected deaths, as you know, put me in possession;) for he would not be my *legitimate* heir."

"Normanloe," said Mr. Westerly, gravely,

"I sincerely regret that there is this story on which to pin the claim. It will reach Adelaide's ears, and she will take it seriously. For though the marriage was illegal, *morally* she will think it binding—though, of course, no title or estate could go to the child."

"No; and I have hoped for lawful heirs to succeed me in this fine property. The baronetcy goes with the small estate of Normanloe Park, which fell to me just after I heard that my cousin had left me Pinegrove; but it was the most improbable thing in the world that I should ever possess either. And now this annoyance is come upon me. Oh, Westerly, believe me, I have been more sinned against than sinning!"

There was a short silence after Sir Ronald had said these words in a pathetic tone.

"Normanloe," said Mr. Westerly, rising, "you will have to put this matter into a law court, and obtain a legal decision concerning it. Then you will be rid of endless worry, and be free to marry if you choose. I should say the thing would be to force upon young Charles the burden of proof, first, that he is your son; secondly, that he is your *lawful* heir. If he cannot do that, Adelaide need hesitate no longer."

CHAPTER XII.

A CRUEL BLOW.

ALMA WESTERLY was passing through the shrubbery at Westerly House, her eyes still wet with the tears which *would* spring when she remembered Ronald's story. For she had just ventured to the school-house, and there, within the doorway, had exchanged hurried, tearful, sympathizing looks and words with the unhappy young fellow.

Suddenly, upon the hard ground—hard, despite its snowy covering—she heard her father's footstep, and heard her father's voice.

"Where have you been, Alma?" said he, sternly.

"To the school, papa," faltered the girl, unused to this tone and manner.

"Then I forbid you ever to go there again, until young Charles leaves this place. I am aware of your *leaning* (I am ashamed to use a stronger word) toward that young man, who, let me tell you, has brought a hornet's nest about his own ears. Shall I explain to you who he really is? I had better do so, for it may cure you of your folly! He is the *illegitimate* son of Sir Ronald Normanloe, though the Baronet denies that he can even prove that much. And he will call upon Charles to sustain his claim in a court of law. It will ruin him! But he has forced Sir Ronald to do so, or he will be saddled with a supposed wife, a woman who never really was his wife! Do you clearly understand this? Oh! I see too well, by your changing face, how deep an in-

terest you feel in the schoolmaster, and I certainly should have dismissed him on that ground alone."

"Papa!" stammered the distressed and heart-broken girl. "Oh, papa! pray believe me when I tell you that Mr. Charles has never—never—"

"Never proposed to you in so many words? I should think not, indeed! But he has dared to love you, or to pretend love for you, and has succeeded in making you love *him*. Is that true or not? If young Lord Arlington were to come here and speak of his affection for you, how would you receive him? And yet he is well-born, handsome, devoted to you; but you have allowed yourself, a young lady of position, to descend to think of the village schoolmaster!"

"Father," cried Alma, her love giving her courage, "he is noble-minded, even if he be only the schoolmaster. But I believe him to be Sir Ronald's son."

"That may be. But I presume you do not expect me to sanction your choice, unless it can be shown that he is Sir Ronald Normanloe's *heir*. Unfortunately, that can never be! Sir Ronald married a Roman Catholic lady—under age, too. The law requires that such marriages shall be solemnized according to the rites of both Churches. This was omitted—not designedly, but it was omitted; and I am now going to explain this to Charles, and to give him his dismissal. I *cannot* have him in the village after his behavior concerning you. The best thing that could possibly happen to him now would be that he should go out in some emigrant ship, and make his way in a new country, for I repeat that he will be *ruined*. Every penny he has saved will go, and who would engage a village schoolmaster with such a history? Romance is *fatal* to gaining a livelihood."

"Father," interrupted the trembling girl, "will it not be enough for you that we shall be separated forever? Help him, then, a little to bear all this, which is coming upon him from his cruel father. Oh, papa, I believe his story! Do not you be unjust or cruel."

"Alma, be silent, and remember you do not again go beyond the grounds until I give you leave. You will be informed when my prohibition is removed; which will not be until that wretched young man has left this place forever."

And so he quitted her, leaving desolation and despair in her young heart.

But it was not alone in Alma's heart that he planted misery. Ronald (who had dismissed his scholars at mid-day, briefly saying that there would be no afternoon school) sat with his head between his bowed hands—waiting—waiting.

He had been roused, indeed, by Alma's visit,

but she had departed; and now, as he listened to Mr. Westerly's promised communication after his interview with Sir Ronald, vague and crushing fears assailed him. Fears that he—he who stood so much alone—should not be able to substantiate his claim; fears that he should never succeed in finding his mother; that in some way his cruel father would be too much for him; that Alma would never be his!

Thus he sat, when he heard Mr. Westerly's brisk footfall on the narrow pathway outside, and started up to meet him.

"Charles," began Mr. Westerly, "it is my painful business to tell you that you have deceived me. Whatever may be the hardship of your own lot, that could not justify you in acting as you have done with regard to my daughter. It appears that you have impressed her with a belief in your story and in your affection for her, and that you have succeeded in completely unsettling her young and impressionable mind. Happily she is young, very young; and therefore will forget. But your own conduct forces me to say that she will not be permitted to quit Westerly House until you have left this neighborhood. I can only advise you to emigrate, for after what has happened I can hardly recommend you elsewhere."

A despairing exclamation escaped the unhappy Ronald, taken by surprise as he then was.

"That is not all," went on Mr. Westerly, in an angry tone. "Sir Ronald Normanloe declares that you are not his son."

"That is a lie!" cried Ronald, fiercely, with clenched hand.

"It may be—I cannot determine that; but what seems undeniably clear is that, even if his son, you are not his heir. The lady whom Sir Ronald married (as he supposed) was not of age and was a Romanist; and as the law requires such marriages to be solemnized according to the rites of each church, the second ceremony being omitted, the supposed marriage was illegal. In point of fact, Sir Ronald was never married, as he assured you."

Never married! His mother never married! That delicate, gentle, high-born mother his childish memories brought back, not his father's wife! Oh, why now should he seek to find her? Better leave her unmolested; she would then, at least, be spared the horror of unmerited disgrace.

He staggered backward with the cruel blow. For him, his world had come to a dreadful end. Even Alma's father pitied his utter misery. He could not speak in his hard, confident tones, as he continued.

"Sir Ronald intends to insist now that you should prove what you have advanced in a law court. If you cannot do that, and he obtains a legal decision in his favor, he is free to marry

again. You had better be prepared, Charles. As for the school, I hope you will be able to vacate it after to-morrow, as I must supply your place, temporarily, at once. Your salary, and, of course, a half-year in advance on account of dismissal without due notice, shall be sent to you to-day. No one regrets more than myself that we should part in this way, but when I remember my daughter, indignation leaves me little room for pity."

And with these words Mr. Westerly went out, leaving Ronald to his bitter fate.

But Ronald was oblivious of those hard words—of his cruel destiny just then. He had fallen back unconscious.

CHAPTER XIII.

MADAME LA MARQUISE.

WE cannot stop to detail Mrs. Westerly's uneasiness when her husband told her the result of his interview with Sir Ronald Normanloe. It far overshadowed her trouble concerning Alma. *That* could be got over; but for Adelaide to lose the opportunity of making this grand marriage was heartrending. Such a chance could never be expected to happen twice in one's lifetime, and Adelaide was growing unequal in temper, and more difficult to get on with every year. And then the whole thing was so thoroughly unpleasant.

"We must hush it up; it must not be breathed," said she. "Let Sir Ronald write to Adelaide expressing his regret that business calls him to London for a time. I should not like to welcome him here till the legal decision is obtained, declaring him free to marry. Oh, Montague, cannot that decision be pronounced without its getting into all the papers? Can nothing be done to keep this matter secret? We must not let it ooze out to the servants."

What would poor Mrs. Westerly have felt could she have known that that faultless domestic, John, was perfectly cognizant of the matter in dispute; that he had overheard a good deal of what was said between his master and Mr. Charles, and that he was fully aware that there was a grave difficulty in the way of Miss Adelaide's contemplated marriage?

The new housekeeper, whom Ronald had befriended, was one of the first to hear it, and evinced, so John thought, some unaccountable triumph thereat.

"She's been excited ever since she heard Sir Ronald was to be married," thought he, "and she's glad the match is like to be off now. It would interfere with her authority, I s'pose; that's what it is."

But that was not it. Something far deeper agitated the mind of the housekeeper. She was strange and silent all day; and, after writing several letters, sent a message to the baronet with her duty, and could he allow her to go for a day's holiday?

Sir Ronald, not in too sweet a mood, angrily refused. It was extremely inconvenient. She had but just come to her place. She could not be spared.

She made no comment on this; but began to question John as to the whisper among the servants that Sir Ronald's marriage would never come off, after all; and as to what they thought about Mr. Charles, the Westerly schoolmaster, being Sir Ronald's own son.

Toward evening the housekeeper could not be found, and the excitement among the servants reached its height when a note was found on the table in her room, in which these words only were written:

"Sir Ronald must suit himself with another house-keeper. Thanks to himself, I have discovered what I came here for."

"How did the Barrownight look when you took him that bit of a letter?" asked Eliza, the under-housemaid, of John.

All the servants were now violently excited as to what it might portend.

"How did he look? Bothered; that's how he looked. Mrs. Walter knows something, you may depend."

"He's not himself; he's off his feed, and pale, and hang-dog-looking," whispered John in Eliza's ear that evening when Sir Ronald's dinner was over.

Another four-and-twenty hours went by. Sir Ronald went to London to confer with his lawyers. Alma, ill with misery, was confined to her own room; while her father and mother could hardly maintain an unconcerned air before the servants and Adelaide. But the latter was quite unconscious of the turn affairs had taken, and was occupied very pleasantly with calculations about her trousseau; for the frost was keen, and she enjoyed such a day best by a cosey fire, work in hand.

The village children were delighted, too, for they had an unexpected holiday. They went to the school, but found it closed, and Mrs. Erne told them there would be no school, perhaps for a week. Mr. Charles was suddenly taken ill, and had to go away.

And what of Mr. Charles himself? Mr. Westerly duly inclosed his salary by check; but received no acknowledgment.

Mr. Charles was unable to write, unable to move, so Mrs. Erne declared.

"The poor young man is in a high fever," she said.

Then Mr. Westerly insisted that a doctor should be sent for to know how soon he could go.

The medical man shook his head, and said he feared that could not be for many days.

"Isn't it sad about poor Mr. Charles, Miss Alma?" remarked Alma's maid, as she was brushing her young lady's hair that evening.

"He's so ill he can't be moved. Quite unconscious, they say, and in a high fever. I'm sure we shall never get such another organist, be the other who he may. He does make the organ speak out grand. But he's to go away as soon as ever he can be moved, I hear. We are all so sorry."

"Ill! In a high fever, and no one to nurse him—no one to speak a word of comfort to him!"

"Oh, Thurton!" exclaimed the young lady, "you know how he came here; you know that he has no one to care for him. Will you go down to the school and arrange for me that Mrs. Erne shall take all proper care of him? Tell her to get everything necessary. I will make it up to her. And, Thurton, take her this."

"This" was an envelope, inclosing fifty pounds, all that the young girl had the power to send.

"I'll see he has what he wants, Miss Alma!" returned Thurton, sympathizingly. "We all think Mr. Charles has been very badly used by some one who ought to take every care of him."

Another day closed, followed by another morning, made gay by sunlight on frosted snow.

Mr. Westerly and Adelaide alike received letters from Sir Ronald; that addressed to Adelaide filled only with lover-like regrets that he was detained from her side by business; that to Mr. Westerly explaining that his interview with his lawyers gave him hopes that the affair would not be so lengthy or troublesome as he had supposed; and imploring that he might call at Westerly House and see Adelaide, if only for a few moments, on the next day but one, as he must run down from London to Pinegrove for a few hours.

Mr. and Mrs. Westerly consulted together, and decided that there could be no harm in allowing Sir Ronald to see Adelaide for so short a time; that, moreover, it would prevent any uncomfortable suspicion or uneasiness on her part.

"How awkward and annoying it is that fellow Charles being taken so ill! Nothing can be done while he lies there; and it is impossible to move him," observed Mr. Westerly, as he answered Sir Ronald's letter.

He now believed that young Charles was the son of the Baronet, but that the latter had escaped being married by his omission of the second ceremony in the Romish Church, and that he had been deserted in his hour of need by a selfish woman, who was glad to break the tie which had bound them.

Since it was so, why should Adelaide lose the chance of a brilliant position?

Adelaide, who already looked upon herself as mistress of Pinegrove, had muffled herself in

furs about an hour after luncheon, and gone out to consult her brother's head gardener concerning certain rare plants with which she wished to fill one of the forcing houses there.

She had plenty of time, for Sir Ronald had sent a note by the second post, regretting that he could not be with her until five o'clock, so that he had decided not to return to town till the train which left at ten P. M.

The short winter afternoon was giving place to growing dusk, and the peculiar dreariness of a winter night just beginning to steal over the snowy landscape, as Adelaide approached the house on her return.

The rumble of carriage wheels, and the sight of a fly drawn by two horses, made her quicken her steps.

"It is Sir Ronald!" thought she, pleased that he should have arrived a good half-hour earlier than she had expected.

But it must not be supposed that Adelaide Westerly loved the Baronet. Oh, no; she was content to secure such a brilliant position as he had offered her without any falling in love.

But she was pleased to see him arrive early, since he had told her he should make a point of ordering new furniture for some of the rooms at Pinegrove; and she wished to have plenty of time to say a word concerning the carpets and lounges for her own boudoir and suit of apartments.

And then Adelaide allowed one sigh to float unchecked upon the winter wind; a sigh given to a love that she had lost—lost, too, by her own deliberate action.

"Since that is forever past, why waste another regret on it?" said she to herself, philosophically. "He has let all these years go by, and never asked me again!"

But she did regret somewhat bitterly, as she passed on to greet the middle-aged Baronet, lingering a little, while the fly came slowly up the avenue.

Who was the "he" sighed for by Adelaide Westerly? An old love, rejected for his poverty, when she was a proud young beauty of scarce nineteen.

Since those days the old love had risen in the world, was the owner of a fair amount of wealth, and a pretty country place; and though still a bachelor, he had never renewed his offer to Adelaide Westerly.

No word of regret had the proud girl spoken; but very bitter, for many years, had been the pangs of inward repining. But she had now decided to be the mistress of Pinegrove, and henceforth would think no more of Lennox Tempest.

So she dressed her face in smiles as the carriage drew up, and stepped forward, wondering a little that Sir Ronald had not driven over in one of his own carriages. But it was not Sir Ronald who alighted. Oh, no! it was the

tall and very elegant figure of a lady who stepped from the vehicle—a lady apparently about thirty-five, but very handsome, and whose graceful toilet and foreign air caused Adelaide to look at her with fresh interest.

She was followed by a well-dressed, respectable maid, unmistakably English.

Adelaide stood aside, and heard the foreign-looking lady inquire if Mr. and Mrs. Westerly were at home, and the next moment she passed into the house.

Adelaide quickened her steps, in order to hasten to the drawing-room, for she felt a curiosity to know who this elegant lady might be; so, without staying to remove her hat and fur cloak, she walked in after the visitor.

Mrs. Westerly had read the name on the card sent in, with as much surprise as that Adelaide had felt on witnessing the arrival. "Madame la Marquise de Rocheville" was the name.

The Marchioness followed her card, and Mrs. Westerly rose to receive her.

"Madame," began the elegant lady, with a foreign accent, "you are not acquainted with me, I know."

"But I hope to become so," said Mrs. Westerly, with a courteous smile, for the stranger impressed her most favorably; besides, was she not of high rank? "Pray let me give you a seat near the fire. Here are my sister and my husband."

The stranger again bowed; and, when she looked at Adelaide, tears came into her eyes.

"Oh, madam," she faltered, "my visit will cause pain to others, and especially to this beautiful young lady!"

All regarded her with surprise; while Mr. and Mrs. Westerly felt vaguely uneasy.

But Adelaide was only surprised, for she had heard nothing, and therefore formed no conjecture.

"De Rocheville is not the name of my husband," continued the beautiful stranger, in a voice broken by emotion. "I wish to renounce even his name; and, therefore, on my own unexpected accession to the wealth of an aged and distant relative, Madame la Marquise de Rocheville, I have assumed her title, since I am the only living representative of that family, and the direct heiress. Summoned by a faithful attendant, who has but just succeeded in finding his whereabouts, I have traveled day and night—for my son's sake, and for the sake, also, of this young lady!"

With swift intuition Mrs. Westerly interposed at this juncture.

"Oh, stay, I entreat you! Come and explain what you have to say alone with me!" she exclaimed.

"No!" cried Adelaide, coming forward; "since it concerns me, I must hear it! What is it, madame? And who is your son?"

"My son has borne the name of Charles all these years. I have just seen him—I and this old faithful nurse, who, for his sake, obtained the post of housekeeper at Pinegrove. And not in vain!"

"What can the schoolmaster here have to do with Pinegrove?" asked Adelaide, in calm wonder.

"Every thing; for he is—"

"Oh, no; do not tell her so abruptly! She has heard nothing!" cried Mrs. Westerly.

"Adelaide, do go away! I will come to you directly!" said Mr. Westerly, interposing.

"That is not possible!" she answered, with dignity. "Something of vital importance to me is evidently under discussion! I must hear it, whatever it may be!"

"Have courage, young lady!" said the visitor, turning to her, with feeling.

"I have courage!" replied Adelaide. "Tell me what it is, madame?"

"Mr. Charles, as he has been called, is the son, the only son, of Sir Ronald Normanloe!"

"Of—of whom?" asked Adelaide, growing very pale.

"The only son of Sir Ronald Normanloe!" repeated La Marquise. "Oh, my dear young lady, be thankful that you have been told this in time! I am the wife of Sir Ronald! But years ago he drove me from him, and, for spite, removed my dear boy from the relatives to whose care I had consigned him."

"His wife? You, Sir Ronald's wife? And he dared to ask me to be his wife!" said Adelaide, very slowly.

"It is now my duty to say a word," interposed Mr. Westerly, in a somewhat authoritative tone. "Adelaide, Sir Ronald has not put that indignity upon you; nor did he mean to deceive this lady. Madam, it is my turn to explain what will, unhappily, be very painful to you; but I cannot now avoid it. Your marriage with Sir Ronald, then Mr. Normanloe, was not legal, owing to the omission of the second ceremony, according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church."

"Not legal? The second ceremony omitted? Has he then dared to say *that?*" exclaimed the lady, in deepest indignation. "Sir, my servant who is with me—a faithful attendant of my mother's—was a witness of my marriage according to both rites. Moreover, I have the proofs of both. I am Sir Ronald Normanloe's wife; although I choose rather to style myself Madame de Rocheville. Oh, I will appeal at once to the law courts! It shall be known to all England that I am really and truly his wife."

She spoke so vehemently, with such earnestness of assurance in her voice, that Mrs. Westerly and Adelaide were already convinced, and Mr. Westerly nearly so.

"Can you prove this, madame? Can you

show me those papers?" asked he, now as pale as Adelaide herself, who had sunk upon the nearest chair.

"They are here!" cried Ronald's mother.

At this moment the noise of wheels, followed by a loud peal, resounded through the house.

"It is Sir Ronald!" cried Mrs. Westerly, aghast. "We cannot see him! I must give orders."

Adelaide started up.

"Let him be admitted!" cried she. "Let him face his wife, and—me!"

A footman, throwing open the door of the room, announced, in a pompous voice, "Sir Ronald Normanloe."

The Baronet advanced within the well-lighted apartment, smiling, assured as to his welcome.

He was hastening to Adelaide's side, when she rose and confronted him sternly. Madame de Rocheville had stepped aside; but Adelaide came forward.

"Sir Ronald," she said, in a strange, hard voice, "let me present you to this lady, whom you will well remember—your wife—Lady Normanloe!" And then, with overpowering disdain in her mien, Adelaide walked straight out of the room.

It was all so sudden, so totally unlooked for, that the wily Baronet was overwhelmed. He was crushed, and could not find any words to utter.

His wife was there before his eyes, and in the background the servant, who could give evidence of both ceremonies having been duly performed.

"Have you nothing to say?" asked Mr. Westerly, sternly. "Clear yourself, or leave this house at once, and covered with disgrace!"

Sir Ronald had nothing to say. He slunk away—cowed—beaten. He might own Pinegrove, but his place in society was gone!

A week later it was known all over the county, in mansion and cottage, that Miss Westerly could never be the mistress of Pinegrove.

"What an unpleasant thing to happen!" remarked a somewhat unpleasant lady. "How will she face the world after this?"

The person so addressed wondered also; only in *his* manly heart—(once sorely wounded by Adelaide's pride), a great pity—a new tide of love—rose up.

Next day, as Adelaide sat alone in her room, utterly dejected, a letter was put into her hand, signed "Lennox Tempest."

An hour after, Mrs. Westerly was surprised to meet her, looking radiant, yet tearful.

"Why, Adelaide," cried she, "what has happened? I left you so unhappy, and now I see you as you used to appear six or seven years ago!"

"I was coming to tell you!" said Adelaide, with a burst of joyful tears. "You will get rid of me, after all! Lennox Tempest has asked me again if—if I will marry him!"

And so there were to be wedding festivities, after all, at Westerly House, and Adelaide had to order once more her countermanded bridal finery.

Mr. and Mrs. Westerly felt profound satisfaction that their sister should thus be well settled in life, while Adelaide herself felt that in losing Pinegrove she had gained—happiness.

Mr. Charles, the schoolmaster, is being very tenderly nursed at Westerly House by his mother, Madame la Marquise, and the faithful nurse, who had never lost sight of her old mistress till, on hearing of Sir Ronald's accession to wealth and rank, she had resolutely set herself the task of finding his son.

We have said that Ronald was nursed by the loving care of these two women, but it was the nurse who waited on him, and his mother, who, elegantly attired, sat by his bedside.

And when convalescence set in unmistakably, and the invalid was moved to Mr. Westerly's dressing-room, then Alma would come to the door, and leave a bunch of flowers or a book, and make timid inquiry of Madame la Marquise.

And we need not be surprised that she was permitted to do so, for Ronald, the undisputed heir to the Normanloe name and baronetcy, and to the small estate which went with it; the undoubted successor to his mother's wealth, which was considerable; and the possible future owner of Pinegrove, was in a widely different position to that of poor Mr. Charles, the organist and schoolmaster.

So he had been moved up to Westerly House to be nursed, on pretense that he must make room for the new schoolmaster. From that day the roses came stealing back to Alma's fair cheek, and her father no longer had a word to say against Ronald.

And Ronald? Hope and joy saved him.

They told him that Pinegrove was closed, and Sir Ronald gone abroad; and then his

mother engaged a commodious furnished house in the neighborhood till she could settle future plans.

There she and Ronald took up their abode as soon as the bitterest part of the winter was over; and when the primroses were all in bloom and the violets ran riot in the woods, and the sun stole out every day to greet them with his beams, then Adelaide was wedded.

Madame la Marquise graced the wedding. Yes; and Ronald also. Indeed, he it was who walked back down the churchyard path with Alma, who had officiated as chief bridesmaid at the ceremony, and who looked so bride-like herself in her lovely soft, white robe, looped up with the jessamine's starry flowers.

"They'd make a handsome pair!" whispered more than one spectator.

It was that very evening, after the grand banquet given at Westerly House in honor of Adelaide's bridal, that Ronald whispered a word to Alma as he sat by her side in a recess of the grand saloon—"Do come and look at the flowers, dearest; the conservatory is all lighted up!"

She rose with beating heart.

But long before they got among the flowers, he had seized her hand in his.

"My darling, I may tell you now what your heart must have told you already. Oh, Alma! my life will be nothing to me without your love—your love which would be its joy and crown!"

She could not answer him a word; but her silence was from excess of happiness.

There, among the beautiful flowers, on Adelaide's happy wedding day, Alma whispered to Ronald that her love was his.

Six months later, Sir Ronald Normanloe died very suddenly, at Homburg, and without a will. His son, therefore, succeeded to his vast property, and, to the unspeakable satisfaction of Mr. and Mrs. Westerly, the magnificent place called Pinegrove was attached to the family estates after all, for it became the home of Alma, as Lady Normanloe.

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